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Nicht-narrative Comics

Über diese Ausgabe

Was verbindet zwei Panels, die nebeneinander stehen? Die Antwort auf diese Frage lautet zumeist ›eine Erzählung.‹ So verlangt zum Beispiel Scott McCloud, ›einige der Geheimnisse zu lüften, die die unsichtbare Kunst des Comic-Erzählens umgeben‹ (74). In CLOSURE #8 möchten wir diese Reduzierung von Comics auf ihre Narrativität kritisch hinterfragen und stattdessen nicht-narrrative Ansätze des Mediums in den Blick nehmen. Aus einer Vielzahl von Forschungsperspektiven lösen sich die Beiträge von der Idee des Narrativs, hinterfragen das Prinzip der *closure*, lassen den Plot in den Hintergrund treten – und ebnen damit den Weg für eine Theoretisierung des Nicht-Narrativen. Es geht unseren Autor_innen dabei um die Vielzahl formaler, abstrakter, nichtfiktionaler oder poetischer Konstellationen, die in den Blick geraten, sobald die narrative Lesart nicht mehr die allein gültige ist. ›Müssen wir auf die Erzählung verzichten?‹ (Groensteen, 174) Unsere Beiträge beantworten diese Frage mit einem ›Ja‹ und richten damit den Fokus auf die logischen, formalen, affektiven, konstruierten Verbindungen, die an die Stelle der Erzählung treten.

Obwohl unsere Ausgabe nicht-narrative Comics jenseits von Diegese, Sequenz oder Figuren untersucht, ist sie nicht allein der *Abwesenheit* vertrauter Formen der Narration gewidmet. Vielmehr fragen unsere Beiträge nach dem Reservoir von *Darstellungsmöglichkeiten*, das verborgen bleibt, wenn immer bereits ereignishafte, narrative Zustandsveränderungen als Prinzip der Panelverknüpfung vorausgesetzt werden. So kann etwa ›Abstraktion‹ als eigenes Ordnungsprinzip hervortreten, sobald die Kontinuität gezeichneter Charaktere und ihrer raumzeitlichen Veränderungen experimentell aufgehoben wird. Anstatt nicht-narrative Comics als Subgenre zu klassifizieren, schlagen wir vor, Abstraktion als formales Angebot des Mediums zu betrachten, durch das die Parameter des Comics neu ausgelotet werden können: sein doppelter Blick auf die Sequenz und das Layout der Panels, sein Zeichengeflecht, seine Verteilung textueller und visueller Elemente, sowie die gezeichneten Spuren, die sich nicht in der Erzählung einhegen lassen. Eine solche ›über das Diegetische und das Narrativ hinausgehende‹ (Molotiu, 87) Bewegung findet sich zuhauf in abstrakten und experimentellen Comics – und darüber hinaus. Unsere Artikel wenden sich auch Möglichkeiten nicht-narrativer Darstellung zu, die sich in den Zwischenräumer populärer Comics und ihrer dynamischen Handlungen finden lassen.

Unsere Beiträge bieten somit Lektüren an, die sich von sequenziellen, linearen oder episodischen Modi der Darstellung lösen. Das nicht-narrative Potential des Comics verlangt dabei nach einer Neubewertung seiner Form sowie einem Fokus auf die Materialität des Mediums. Wie Bukatman es formuliert, bedarf der so betrachtete Comic einer ›Aufmerksamkeit für die Fläche, Vernachlässigung der linearen Sequenz, sowie einer auf Abstraktion abzielenden Bewegung‹ (113). Unser Versuch ›das Medium kritisch neu zu denken‹ (Baetens, 104) zielt darauf ab, unterschiedlich ausgeprägte Formen von Narrativität durch das Prinzip der Abstraktion zu ersetzen. Welche neuen ›Logiken‹ treten durch eine Bewegung hervor, die die narrative Ordnung unterläuft? Welches ›kohärente gedankliche Modell‹ (Kukkonen) wenden Leser_innen an, sobald das Konzept der Erzählung wegbricht? Welche diagrammatischen, abstrakten, flachen, statischen Zeichen und welche konzeptuellen Modelle formen graphische Lesarten – und welches Wissen generieren sie?

Schließlich erschöpft sich die Funktion des Nicht-Narrativen nicht in einer formalistischen Revision der Comic-Medialität. Wenn es keine Geschichte ist, so hat es doch Methode – oder zumindest eine *Funktion*, die sowohl der künstlerischen Suche nach Darstellungsmöglichkeiten jenseits des Narrativen und den alternativen Lesarten der Rezipient_innen zugrunde liegt. Wenn der ›Zustand eines guten Lebens für Viele ein gänzlich nicht-narratives Unterfangen ist‹ (Strawson), können wir analog dazu das *gute Betrachten eines Comics* im Sinne nicht-narrativer Formfindung verstehen? In diesem Sinne zeigen unsere Beiträge, dass Darstellungsweisen jenseits der Erzählung etwa der Modellierung revolutionärer Zeitlichkeit (Aramburú Villavisencio) dienen können, sowie auch einer medienspezifischen Untersuchung traumatischer Erlebnisse (Hindrichsen) oder der Verbildlichung statischen, scheinbar unveränderlichen Alltagslebens (Picado/Senna/Schneider). All diese Beiträge teilen die Prämisse, dass ›Nicht-Narrativität‹ weder unpolitisch noch funktionslos zu sein hat, sondern vielmehr unentwirrbar mit der kulturellen Verhandlung von Macht, Klasse und Gender verflochten ist. Die Erfahrungen und Affekte, denen unsere Autor_innen in Comics am Rande des Narrativen nachspüren, erscheinen dabei zuweilen als zu ungeordnet, um narrativer Logik oder linearer Sequenz zugänglich zu sein. Ihr formales Äquivalent ist stattdessen der *Bruch* in der Entfaltung des Plots oder ein Emblem, das sich bewährten narrativen Mustern entzieht.

Anstatt schlicht Comics ihre Erzählung abzusprechen, beobachten die Beiträge Besonderheiten des Comics abseits der Sequenz: so können die Materialität des Comics, Farben, Linien, Soundeffekte, Symbole, Design, Diagrammatik, Performativität, Gesten, das Einzelpanel und die Simultanität der Zeichen in den Vordergrund rücken, sobald wir die Frage ›Was passiert als nächstes?‹ hinter uns lassen. Und wer wäre besser geeignet, uns den Weg in diese abstrakte Welt zu weisen als **Gareth A. Hopkins**? Hopkins' Werk setzt sich seit geraumer Zeit mit den Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten abstrakter, sequenzieller Kunst auseinander. Als Titelbild unserer Ausgabe hat er einen ›abstrakten Landschaftscomic‹ beigesteuert, der zunächst in

Panels unterteilt zu sein scheint. Aber: nicht alle Rechtecke tragen zu der kohärenten Form bei. Das Panel am unteren linken Rand scheint sich dem Überblick zu entziehen. Diese Dissonanz im Gleichklang bricht mit der zunächst angenommenen Ordnung und zieht die Kohärenz des Gesamtbildes in Zweifel.

Spannungen dieser Art – zwischen Muster und Kollaps, Ordnung und Bruch – liegen auch dem Comic zugrunde, den Hopkins eigens für diese Ausgabe erstellt hat. Zunächst etablieren seine Doppelseiten eine beruhigende Symmetrie, bei der auf der linken Seite fließende Farbverläufe und auf der rechten Seite organische, geschwungene schwarze Formen zu sehen sind. Diese changieren zwischen Vordergrund und Hintergrund, scheinen zum Teil von einer grauen Masse überdeckt, aus der sie wiederum in anderen Panels hervorgehen. Diese deutliche Opposition verändert sich allerdings plötzlich auf der vierten Doppelseite: Hier tauschen die Panels ihre Positionen und werden neu in diagonalen Serien angeordnet, die sich kreuz und quer über beide Seiten hinweg erstrecken. Hopkins' Formexperiment macht uns mit einer Zeichenwelt vertraut, die eigene Rhythmen, Bewegungen und Ordnungsprinzipien etabliert – visuelle Ereignisse, die nicht ohne weiteres *erzählt* werden können.

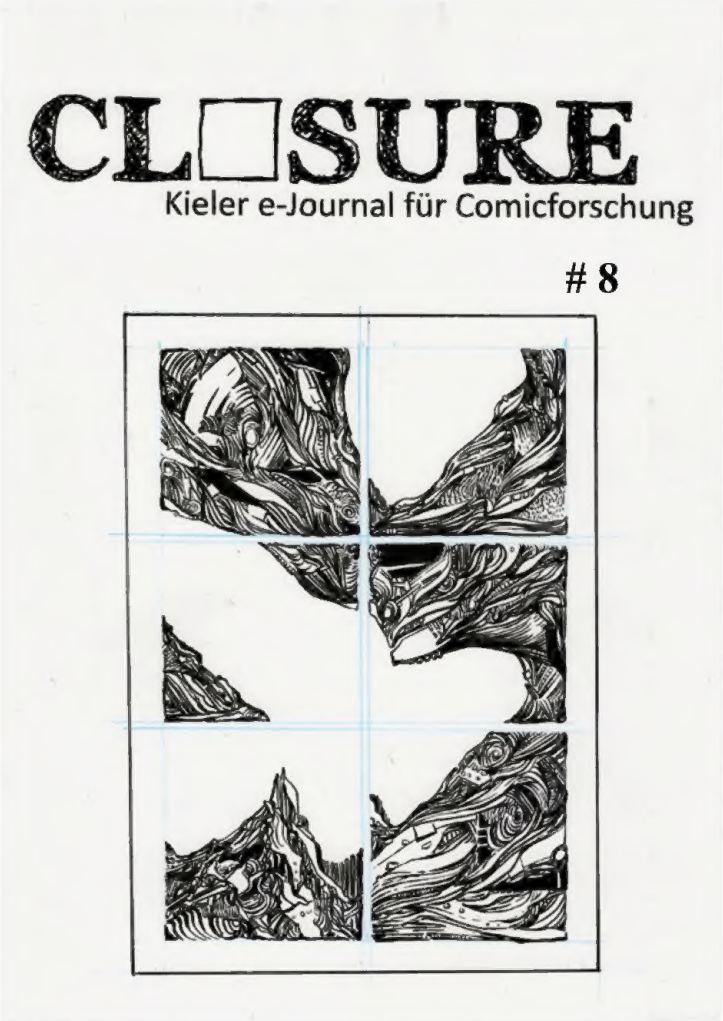

Abb.: Gareth A. Hopkins, Titelbild CLOSURE #8

In seinem dritten Beitrag für CLOSURE #8, dem »Closure Process Comic,« führt uns Hopkins durch den Entstehungsprozess seiner seltsamen Sequenzen. Sein »non-abstract comic« über die Gestaltung abstrakter Sequenzen stellt Kontingenz und Entscheidungen als eigene Gestaltungsprinzipien vor. Dieser Meta-Comic ist eine Studie künstlerischer Zufälle und zugleich ein Appel dafür, das Ungeplante zuzulassen, ihm zu folgen und es in den künstlerischen Prozess zu integrieren. Damit bietet Hopkins zum einen eine Erzählung künstlerischen Schaffens und einer Form des Denkens *mit* (statt nur über) den Comic. Auch hier sind allerdings die Möglichkeiten des Mediums nicht auf eine lineare Erzählung beschränkt.

Statt einer Anleitung deutet Hopkins' Darstellung des künstlerischen Entscheidungsprozesses eine eigene, nicht-narrative Ebene an, eine Auseinandersetzung mit Materialien und Umgebung, die nicht als Plot zu fassen ist.

Statt klarer Abgrenzungen, entwickeln sich in den Comics dieser Ausgabe Mischzonen, in denen Sequenzen narrativ beobachtet werden können – aber keineswegs erzählbar werden müssen. Dazu passend zeigt **Jan Baetens** in seiner systematischen Darstellung, dass es vorteilhaft sein kann, Narrativität und Nicht-Narrativität auf einer ›konträren Achse‹ anzuordnen, statt von eine starren Opposition auszugehen. Indem er die Aufmerksamkeit auf Übergänge der Erzählbarkeit lenkt, zeigt sein Artikel – »Nonnarrative or Noncomics? (with some notes on *Holz* by Olivier Deprez and Roby Comblain)« – das Comics ›beides zugleich‹ sein können. Baetens argumentiert, dass jegliche Annahme essentieller Handlungslosigkeit zum Scheitern verurteilt ist. Dieser methodische Zweifel gilt auch für schematische Versuche, Abstraktion mit der Aufhebung von Erzählungen gleichzusetzen. Baetens schlägt stattdessen eine subtilere Form der Interpretation vor, aus der ›non-narrative‹ als eine kontextsensible und verhandelbare Zuschreibung hervorgeht. Statt eines Labels, das einzelnen Comics mit taxonomischer Gewissheit qua Medium aufgedrückt wird, erlaubt es Baetens' Ansatz, mehr oder weniger *intensive* Annahmen der Erzählbarkeit zu unterscheiden, mitsamt der Alternativen, die sie jeweils möglich machen. Auf diese Weise kann er faszinierende Zwischenzustände in den Blick nehmen, etwa Comics als »Erzählungen, die an Fahrt verlieren.« Die Vorteile von Baetens' Verweigerung eines Medienessentialismus zeigen sich insbesondere in seinem Beispiel des ›noncomic‹ *Holz*, einem vielgestaltigen, multimedialen Projekt. Das ›non‹ in ›nonnarrative‹ wird in diesem Artikel zum Kippbild. Sobald es in den Vordergrund rückt, bietet es die Gelegenheit, die Materialien und Prozesse, die wir mit dem Medium ›Comic‹ verbinden, experimentell neu zu bestimmen.

Warum sollten wir uns also mit Narrativität auseinandersetzen? Und welche Erkenntnisse gewinnen wir durch den Fokus auf *Nicht-Narrativität*? **Andrea Aramburú Villavisencios** Beitrag widmet sich dem 2018 erschienenen Comic *Waiting* von Adriana Lozano Román. Der Comic ist eine Sammlung von Portraits sehr unterschiedlicher Frauen, die jedoch eine Gemeinsamkeit haben: sie wirken unglücklich auf die Betrachter_in. Bezugnehmend auf Sara Ahmeds Konzept des ›guten Lebens,‹ beschreibt die Autorin, wie der Comic die Zweidimensionalität der Comicseite nutzt, um den vermeintlich zeitlichen Prozess des Wartens zu verräumlichen. Aramburú Villavisencio bescheinigt *Waiting* eine Ästhetik, die an Frauenmagazine aus den 90er Jahren erinnert und argumentiert, dass die einzelnen Bilder eine atmosphärische Spannung erschaffen, ohne dabei jedoch eine ›Erzählung‹ zu etablieren. Durch die Abwesenheit des Erzählens werden die mit Bildern ruhender, sich zurücklehnender Frauen konfrontierten Rezipient_innen zu ›losgelösten Lesenden‹ (›unmoored readers‹), deren Interpretation daraus entsteht, dass ihre Blicke auf den Bildern umherwandern.

Aramburú Villavisencios Lektüren einzelner Bilder legen überzeugend dar, dass das Warten bei Lozano entweder als ›endlos und mühsam‹ verstanden oder für sein revolutionäres Potenzial gefeiert werden kann. Letztere Lesart ›lädt uns dazu ein, das Ruhen als einen intersubjektiven, körperlichen Modus des Nachdenkens über weibliche *agency* zu lesen.‹

Auch **Lorenz Hindrichsen** untersucht in seinem Artikel »Beyond the Chronotope: De-narrativization in Graphic Trauma Narratives (1980-2018)« die darstellerischen Möglichkeiten, die sich aus der Suspendierung sequenziellen Erzählens ergeben. Er stellt die These auf, dass sich der Kern sowohl individuellen als auch kollektiven Traumas dem narrativen Ausdruck entzieht. Im Kontext eines zeitlich nicht fixierbaren Phänomens wie dem Trauma erscheint der Rückzug sequenziellen Erzählens nur konsequent. Die Ent-Narrativisierung ›kultureller, historischer und biografischer‹ Zeitlichkeit spiegelt die Art und Weise wider, wie die Folgen der Gewalt einer vermeintlich kausalen Verbindung von Vergangenheit und Gegenwart eine Absage erteilen. Am Ende ist es die traumatische Erfahrung, die die Verletzungen der Vergangenheit priorisiert und die daraus entstehenden Ordnungen immer wieder zerstört, um sie danach neu zu sortieren. Dementsprechend fordern die Brüche, die sich der narrativen Logik der Erzählung entziehen, dazu auf, nicht einfach einen Weg von der Krise zu ihrer Lösung zu erzählen. Comickünstler_innen stellen Traumata nicht einfach nur dar, sondern zeigen, wie die emotionale Reaktion auf die dargestellten Traumata funktioniert, wie sie die vermeintliche Kohärenz von Erinnerung fragmentiert, individuelle Wiederholungsmuster untrennbar miteinander verwebt und eine zukunftsorientierte Vorstellung von Zeitlichkeit untergräbt. Eine derartige Infragestellung von Geschichten durch nicht-narrative Formen kann ›strategisch‹ sein; sie kann die Forderung ›voranzuschreiten‹ oder die Vergangenheit hinter sich zu lassen, verweigern. Comicspezifische Ent-Narrativisierung zeigt uns, dass es ein erster Schritt sein kann, dem Trauma seinen Widerstand gegen das Erzählen zuzugestehen. Nur so können wir sowohl die darstellerische als auch die ethische Bedeutung der Folgen des Leids ermessen.

Wenn Comics Narrativität nicht in den Vordergrund rücken, sind sie deshalb nicht automatisch nicht-narrativ. Wie **Benjamim Picado**, **João Senna** und **Greice Schneider** in ihrem Beitrag »Comics, Non-narrativity, Non-Eventfulness: Three Examples from Brazil« zeigen, ermöglicht ein Nebeneinanderstellen von Narrativität und *intrigue* – narrativer Spannung – eine genauere Comiclektüre. Dieser Blickwinkel erlaubt es uns, die Idee einer stringent verwobenen Handlung im Comic in der Hintergrund treten zu lassen, ohne dabei jedoch per se auf Narrativität verzichten zu müssen. Picado, Senna und Schneider gehen davon aus, dass die Betrachtung einer nur mehr oder weniger handlungsstiftenden Panelanordnung es uns erlaubt, ›geringfügige Ereignishaftigkeit‹ von absoluter ›Nicht-Narrativität‹ zu unterscheiden. Diese theoretischen Vorüberlegungen zu einer ›reduzierten‹ Handlung kommen anschließend in der Analyse zeitgenössischer brasilianischer Comics zur Anwendung. Die von den Autor_innen gewählten Beispiele inszenieren das Alltägliche, indem sie die Aufmerksamkeit

der Lesenden auf ein Nebeneinander von Sequenzialität und Flächigkeit und einer Vielzahl von Formen oder Wiederholungen lenken. Der Beitrag zeigt, dass das inhaltliche Interesse an einer Poetik der Alltäglichkeit eine wandelbare Vorstellung dessen, was ›Ereignis‹ ist, voraussetzt ohne jedoch zu irgendeinem Zeitpunkt zu einem stabilen, nicht-narrativen Gebilde zu werden. Aus diesem Grund kann der Artikel auch als Aufruf gelesen werden, jedwede Dichotomien zwischen Narrativität und ihrem vermeintlichen Gegenteil, der Nicht-Narrativität, kritisch zu hinterfragen.

Die Bedeutung nicht-narrativer Zeichen (und die nicht-narrativen Lektürestrategien, die sie zutage fördern), denen die Beiträge von Aramburú-Villavisencio, Hinrichsen sowie Picado, Senna und Schneider nachspüren, sollten jedoch keinesfalls als eindeutig oder grundlegend *greifbar* verstanden werden. Die Betrachtung des ›Nicht-Narrativen‹ verlangt danach, dass jede noch so vermeintlich stabile Konstante von Narrativität kritisch hinterfragt wird. Ein gelungenes Beispiel hierfür ist **Thierry Groensteen**s Beitrag » Quasi-Figuren. Im Grenzbereich der Körperlichkeit.« Der Autor unterzieht die etablierte Kategorie der ›literarischen Figur‹ einer Neubewertung. Er geht davon aus, dass traditionelle Vorstellungen der literarischen Figur darauf basieren, dass die Lesenden bereit sind, sich mit dieser Figur zu identifizieren (Groensteen bezeichnet dies als ›referenzielle Illusion‹). Er macht allerdings auch deutlich, dass es einen großen Unterschied macht, ob von einer auf dem Papier konzipierten Figur oder von einer durch ein_e Schauspieler_in verkörperten Figur die Rede ist. Eine Figur im Comic, so Groensteen, ist untrennbar mit ihrem ›grafischen Code‹ verbunden. Im zweiten Teil seines Beitrags diskutiert der Autor eine Vielzahl minimalistischer Comics, denen er attestiert ›eine Welt reiner Zeichnungen ohne jeglichen anthropomorphischen Bezug‹ zu erschaffen. Unter anderem zeigt Groensteen, dass die miniaturisierten Zeichnungen von Maaike Hartjes und Lewis Trondheim durch ihre starke Vereinfachung das Konzept der literarischen Figur kritisch hinterfragen; außerdem erklärt er, warum José Parrondos *Eggman* durchaus noch als Figur zu betrachten ist, obwohl sie auf nichts anderes als ihr ›gezeichnet sein‹ reduziert zu sein scheint. Der Beitrag schließt mit einer Betrachtung von Marion Fayolles Comics. Hier sind die Figuren – ganz im Gegensatz zu den zuvor besprochenen Beispielen – ›realistisch‹ gezeichnet, und dennoch treten ihre papiernen Merkmale unmissverständlich in den Vordergrund. Obgleich alle in diesem Beitrag besprochenen Beispiele die Formhaftigkeit der Figuren und die Interaktion von Figur und Grund betonen, gelangt Groensteen zu der Schlussfolgerung, dass unser Wunsch nach Narrativität uns dazu verleitet, Figuren in allen erdenklichen Gestalten, Formen und Punkten zu sehen.

Neben unserem Sonderbereich zu nicht-narrativen Comics, liefert der offene Themenbereich von CLOSURE #8 drei weitere Forschungsansätze zu Theorie und Praxis sequenzieller Kunstformen. In »Graphic Storytelling: Teaching Experience and Utility« untersucht **Darren C. Fisher** die soziale Dimension des Zeichnens. Er betont die Bedeutung,

die der kulturellen Praxis des Zeichnens bei der Entwicklung unzähliger Kunstformen zukommt und hebt zugleich hervor, dass es auch im Kontext mentaler Gesundheit und Achtsamkeit eine wichtige Rolle spielt. Fisher argumentiert, dass Zeichnen eine fundamentale Möglichkeit menschlichen Ausdrucks ist, deren Ausübung jedoch in unterschiedlichen Altersgruppen und kulturellen Kontexten stark variiert. Der Beitrag denkt Zeichnen als ein ›Werkzeug des Genusses‹ und sucht zugleich zwei konträre Annäherungen an die Praxis des Zeichnens – ›beobachtendes Zeichnen‹ und ›Zeichnen aus dem Gedächtnis‹ – zusammenzudenken. In diesem Kontext merkt er allerdings auch an, dass bestehende Konzepte, wie zum Beispiel Csikszentmihalyis ›Flow Theory,‹ in starkem Gegensatz zu zeitgenössischen gesellschaftlichen Normen wie dem omnipräsenten Verlangen nach einer allumfassenden Produktivität stehen. Diese Normen, so Fisher, ›sind herausfordernde Hindernisse, die es insbesondere dann zu überwinden gilt, wenn es darum geht, Erwachsenen das Zeichnen beizubringen.‹ Der Beitrag schließt mit einer kurzen Beschreibung eines Workshops, der im Rahmen der CLOSURE International Autumn School (2020) gehalten wurde. Hier veranschaulicht Fisher, wie die zuvor dargelegten theoretischen Prämissen in der Praxis zur Anwendung gelangen können.

Barbara M. Eggerts Aufsatz trägt den Titel »Never Judge a Book by Its Cover? Picturing the Interculturally Challenged Self in the Japanese Journals of European Comics Artists Dirk Schwieger, Inga Steinmetz, and Igort.« Sie geht davon aus, dass Japan – bekannt als Geburtsort von Manga und Anime – seit den 1990er Jahren viele europäische Comickünstler_innen angezogen hat, die dort arbeiten oder auf der Suche nach Inspiration sind. Der Beitrag nimmt Dirk Schwiegers *Moresukine* (2006), Igorts *Quaderni giapponesi/Japanese Notebooks* (2015/17) und Inga Steinmetz' *Verliebt in Japan* (2017) in den Blick; die Autorin analysiert und vergleicht diese drei sehr unterschiedlichen Beispiele hinsichtlich ihrer comicspezifischen Darstellung interkultureller Erfahrungen in Japan. Fokussiert auf die Art der Selbstdarstellung, die sich mit Phänomenen wie dem Kulturschock oder Anpassungsprozessen auseinandersetzt, diskutiert sie ob, wie, und mit welchen Folgen diese autobiographisch inspirierten Comics ›etablierte‹ Theorien interkultureller Anpassung widerspiegeln oder diesen widersprechen – trotz oder gerade wegen ihres unterschiedlichen Grades an Fiktionalität und Comicfizierung. Zum einen verortet Eggert ihre Fallstudien in der Tradition des Reisetagebuchs. Gleichzeitig untersucht sie aber auch die ›medienspezifischen Möglichkeiten des Comics, wie zum Beispiel Fokussierung, Übertreibung und Auslassung.‹ In ihrer konzisen Analyse dieser Art der interkulturellen Repräsentation zeigt die Autorin, dass Comics sich auf einzigartige Weise der Kultur anderer annähern, sie wahrnehmen oder eben auch missverstehen können.

In ihrem Beitrag » Rhetoric of Images. Emblematic Structures and Craig Thompson's *Habibi*« geht **Julia Ingold** der Frage nach, inwiefern die Rhetorik des Bildes und die Figurativität des Textes im Comic und im Emblem ähnliche Strategien verfolgen. Im ersten Teil

ihres Aufsatzes analysiert die Autorin ausgewählte Embleme aus Alciatios *Emblematum liber*, um der komplexen Verbindung von Text und Bild auf den Grund zu gehen. Im Einzelnen beschreibt sie den Einsatz von Symbolen und Metaphern in Emblemen und zeigt auf, wie diese sich zu größeren allegorischen Einheiten verbinden. In ihrer darauffolgenden Lektüre von *Habibi* gerät dann – wie schon in den anderen Beiträgen dieser Ausgabe – erneut das mediale Potenzial des Comics in den Blick: Ingold stellt fest, dass Bilderzählungen Metaphern und Symbole aus der ›Welt der Leser_innen‹ so nutzen können, dass sie nicht Teil der dargestellten Welt werden. In Comics wird ›das, was für gewöhnlich in Worte gefasst wird, zu einer mimetischen Zeichnung und ähnelt darin den Bildern im Emblem.‹ Ingold identifiziert zwei Strategien, die sie sowohl dem Comic als auch dem Emblem zuschreibt: beide hinterfragen kritisch die jeweilige Funktion von Worten und Bildern und ermöglichen dadurch eine neue Sprache, die, wie die Autorin schlussfolgert, das Unsichtbare in sichtbare Bilder verwandelt, die ihrerseits rhetorisch werden.

Neben den oben vorgestellten Aufsätzen bietet die achte Ausgabe von CLOSURE auch wieder eine Vielzahl von Rezensionen, die sich sowohl aktueller Forschungsliteratur als auch neuen Comics und Graphic Novels widmen. In der Rubrik ›Comic Context‹ lassen wir unsere CLOSURE Autumn School noch einmal Revue passieren. Im Herbst 2020 haben wir hier mit internationalen Vorträger_innen diskutiert, wie Wissen sich in sequenzielle Kunstformen einschreibt und von diesen medial inszeniert wird. Wir haben uns also gefragt: ›Was wissen Comics?‹ Diese Rubrik beinhaltet eine graphische Aufzeichnung von **Tim Eckhorst**, der den Workshop nicht nur geleitet, sondern auch unsere Diskussionen auf unnachahmliche Weise festgehalten hat. Hieraus ist ein nichtfiktionaler Comic entstanden, der zugleich an die zentrale Frage nach dem ›Nicht-Narrativen‹ unserer aktuellen Ausgabe anschließt.

Kiel, November 2021
Cord-Christian Casper und Kerstin Howaldt für das CLOSURE-Team

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Non-Narrative Comics

About this Issue

What connects two panels placed side by side? The default answer, more often than not, is ›narrative.‹ Scott McCloud, for one, calls for an unravelling of the »[m]ysteries surrounding the invisible art of comics storytelling« (74). Issue #8 of CLOSURE contests this narrative reduction and uncovers a non-narrative art of comics beyond storytelling. From a variety of perspectives, our articles show how comics subtract narrative, withhold closure, stall storytelling – and theorize the unfamiliar formal, abstract, nonfictional or poetic constellations that emerge as a result. »Must Narrative Be Renounced?« (Groensteen, 174) Our contributors experimentally answer ›yes‹ to this question and outline the logical, affective, designed connections that emerge in place of narrative.

Although our issue investigates non-narrative comics beyond the diegetic, beyond sequence, or beyond character, it is not solely dedicated to the *absence* of familiar modes of storytelling. Rather, we ask about the reservoir of *possibilities* obscured by the notion of an eventful, narrative-inducing change of state knitting together dispersed panels. ›Abstraction,‹ particularly, makes itself felt once the continuity of drawn characters and their spatio-temporal development is suspended. However, rather than a subgenre of ›abstract comics‹ deliberately poised at the experimental limits of the medium, non-narrative can be explored as an affordance that always already undergirds comics forms. From this angle, non-narrative is a substrate, a potential for story-suspension that exploits the basic building blocks of comics: their double perspective on sequence and layout; their braiding of dissimilar signs; their changeable distribution of textual and visual elements; their marks on the page that do not have to coalesce into narrative worlds. This movement »*beyond* the diegetic and the narrative« (Molotiu, 87) finds prototypical expression in abstract and experimental comics, yet is not exhausted by them. Consequently, our articles also locate the possibility of non-narrative in the margins of popular storyworlds and propulsive plots.

Our contributors trace the function of panels and signs unmoored from sequential, linear, or episodic modes of storytelling. Such non-narrative potential requires a reconsideration of the form of comics as much as an attention to the materiality of the medium. Once the plot is backgrounded, what emerges in its stead is »the attention to surface, the deemphasis

on linear sequence, the move towards abstraction« (Bukatman, 113). Further, our »critical re-thinking« (Baetens, 104) of comics entails replacing degrees of narrativity with *degrees of abstraction*. Which alternative logics are laid bare by a move beyond narrative coherence? Which »coherent mental model« (Kukkonen, 12) do readers infer once narrativity falls by the wayside? Which diagrammatic, abstract, tabular, static, conceptual models accompany our graphic reading, viewing, and knowing beyond narrative?

Finally, the function of non-narrative is not exhausted by a formalist revision of the mediality of comics. There is a method to the non-story, a function undergirding both an artist's quest for deliberate non-narrative expression and a reader's attempt to discover a non-narrative potential below the event-rich surface of a comics potboiler. After all, if »the business of living well is, for many, a completely non-narrative project« (Strawson, 448), can we analogously understand the business of *viewing comics well* as a storyless concern? Along such lines, our contributors show that representation without and beyond narrative allows for the emergence of revolutionary temporalities (Aramburú Villavisencio), a medium-specific treatment of the disruptive afterlives of trauma (Hindrichsen), or a turn to everyday occurrences (Picado/Senna/Schneider). Non-narrative, then, is neither non-political nor non-functional, but intimately connected to cultural negotiations of power, class, and gender. The experiences and affects that our authors trace throughout a variety of comics at the borders of narrative can appear too unruly to be encompassed by narratives, in particular by any linear succession of changes of state. Their formal equivalent is a hitch in the smooth unfolding of the plot, or an emblem that dislodges itself from well-worn narrative scripts.

Rather than the *absence* of narrativity, our contributors bring out the *presence* of comics features beyond sequence: the material(ity), colours, lines, sound effects, symbols, design, diagrams, performativities, gestures, the sheer *simultaneity* of signs that come to the fore once we suspend the question ›what happens next.‹ CLOSURE #8 considers comics beyond narrative norms in order to explore the forms and functions of a new, abstract world in the shell of the old. Who better to lead us into this uncharted abstract environment than comic artist **Gareth A. Hopkins**? Hopkins' art has long since revolved around the expressive possibilities of abstract sequential art. For our cover, he has contributed an abstract landscape comic that appears to be segmented into panels. But not all of the boxes contribute to the coherent mass: the bottom panels appear misaligned, out of sync – a breach in the representational order that makes us reconsider the consistency of the whole.

Such tensions between order and collapse also animate the comic that Hopkins has created for this issue. Initially, his double-page spreads establish a pattern of intermingling colours on the left side and stark black-and-white shapes on the right. The latter appear as organic, swirling forms either emerging from a grey background or being eclipsed by it. This stark opposition, however, changes on the fourth page of Hopkins' comic: suddenly, the panels are intercut as diagonal, triangular sequences traverse both pages. Amidst this

panel trouble and its aftermath, it becomes clear that abstract comics can create rhythms, movement, forms of order, and jarring breach, a visual eventfulness that cannot be encapsulated by any one story.

In his third contribution to this issue – his mixed-media »Closure Process Comic« – Hopkins takes us through the creation of his sequences. His »non-abstract comic« about making abstract comics becomes a study in contingency and decision. Geometrical plotting of panel layouts is interrupted by bursts of painting over existing shapes. Hopkins' meta-comic is a study in accidents and an appeal to allow them to happen, follow their trajectory, and integrate them into the creative process. On the one hand, the artist offers a compelling narrative of artistic creation and thought *with* comics (rather than only about them). On the other hand, the possibilities of this medium once more are not exhausted by a linear story, let alone an easily followed how-to guide. Rather, the artist's decision process suggests a non-narrative kernel, an engagement with materials and environments that exceeds a straightforward plot.

Fig.: Gareth A. Hopkins, Cover for CLOSURE #8

Instead of hard-and-fast distinctions, comics exhibit mixed zones, in which we can – but by no means must – recover stories. In this vein, **Jan Baetens**' systematic approach to non-narrative in comics and beyond demonstrates that we would do well to consider the ›contrary axis‹ of the narrative/non-narrative relation. On this changeable scale, an exclusive either-or categorisation is replaced with a gradient of narrativity. As Baetens shows in his article »Non-narrative or Noncomics? (with some notes on *Holz* by Olivier Deprez and Roby Comblain)« it is possible for a comic to be »both at the same time.« Baetens demonstrates that any statements regarding the *essentially* non-narrative status of comics are bound to fail, as is any default identification of abstraction with a suspension of storytelling. What emerges from

Baetens' subtle differentiation is ›non-narrative‹ as a negotiable property open to interpretation and context-sensitive negotiation. Instead of a tag applied with taxonomic certainty, his scheme of more-or-less *intense* ascriptions of narrative allows us to diversify the ways in which we encounter alternatives to storytelling – up to and including such phenomena as »narrative running out of steam.« The advantages of Baetens' refusal of media essentialism come to the fore in his presentation of Oliver Deprez's ›noncomic‹ practices in *Holz*. The ›non‹ in ›nonnarrative‹ becomes multistable in Baetens' account, and its discovery an exhilarating occasion for a redistribution of the processes and materialities we ordinarily associate with the comics medium.

What is the function of such contestations of narrativity? What does a focus on non-narrative allow us to *see*? **Andrea Aramburú Villavisencio**'s contribution discusses *Waiting* (2018) by comics artist Adriana Lozano Román, which collects portraits of women who seem unhappy. Picking up on Sara Ahmed's concept of the ›Good Life,‹ the author traces how the comic exploits the flatness of the page to spatialize the allegedly temporal process of waiting. Aramburú Villavisencio observes that Lozano's comic imitates an aesthetics reminiscent of 90s women's magazines, and argues that the images produce an atmospheric tension but do not add to a narrative plot. Due to the absence of narrative, the recipient, who is confronted with portraits of reclining, resting women, becomes an ›unmoored reader‹ whose interpretation emerges from scanning the comics page in multiple directions. In her close reading of individual images, Aramburú Villavisencio reveals that the wait in Lozano's comic can either be read as »endless and tedious« or celebrated for its revolutionary potential which »invites us to interpret rest as an intersubjective and embodied mode of thinking about women's agency.«

In his contribution »Beyond the Chronotope: De-narrativization in Graphic Trauma Narratives (1980-2018),« **Lorenz Hindrichsen** also investigates the representational potential that opens up once narrative – particularly sequential narrative – is suspended. Specifically, he argues that individual and collective trauma revolves around an inexpressible kernel resistant to narrative expression. In the context of the temporal dispersal of traumatic experiences, attenuation of sequentiality emerges as mimetic. Specifically, the de-narrativization of »cultural, historical and biographical« temporalities mirrors the way in which the aftermath of violence cuts across all-too facile causal links between past and present. Trauma, after all, lingers, disrupts, and recasts the order of importance allotted to past injuries. Correspondingly, non-narrative breaches of story logic drive home the impossibility of simply narrating our way from crisis to resolution. Hindrichsen claims that instead of merely representing trauma, comic artists *model* how this emotional response functions, how it fragments memory, entangles the individual in patterns of repetition, and disrupts progressive arrows of time pointing ever-forward. Such derangement of stories by less-than-narrative forms can be »strategic,« refusing as it does any imperative to ›move on,‹ to leave the past behind.

Comics-specific de-narrativization helps us understand that acknowledging trauma's unruly resistance to story may be a first step towards granting the aftermath of distress its full representational, but also ethical, weight.

That comics can attenuate eventfulness does not necessarily entail the absence of narrative. As **Benjamim Picado**, **João Senna** and **Greice Schneider** show in their contribution »Comics, Non-narrativity, Non-Eventfulness: Three Examples from Brazil,« a more precise analysis may be derived if the category of ›intrigue‹ – narrative interest – is considered alongside narrativity. From this vantage point, the sense of a tightly interconnected plot can be productively dialed down in comics, without thereby relinquishing narrative per se. Picado, Senna and Schneider claim that this focus on the more-or-less intriguing nature of a panel arrangement opens up strategies of »differentiating ›low eventfulness‹ from strict ›non-narrativity.‹« This gradient, by extension, allows the authors to pinpoint the function of reduced intrigue in contemporary Brazilian comic strips. The cartoons in their case study evoke mundane moods by reorienting readers' attention to tabularity or iteration, to a whole host of forms alongside the sequential. This thematic concern with the poetics of everyday life hinges on a variable sense of eventfulness without, however, doing away with narrative altogether. The article, then, can also be read as a proposal to complicate any hard-and-fast dichotomy between narrative and its non-narrative counterpart.

The meaning of non-narrative signs (and the non-narrative reading strategies unearthing them) analysed by Aramburú-Villavisencio, Hindrichsen as well as Picado, Senna, and Schneider should not be taken to be unambiguously, and essentially *present*. The inquiry into ›non-narrative‹ requires each and any seeming guarantor of narrativity to be put to the test. Case in point: In his article »Quasi-Figuren. Im Grenzbereich der Körperlichkeit« **Thierry Groensteen** revisits the concept of the ›literary character.‹ He points out that traditional ideas of literary characters rely upon the reader's willingness to identify with the latter (what he terms ›referential illusion‹). Yet, characters conceptualized on the page differ from those embodied by actors on stage or screen: a comic book character cannot be separated from its ›graphic code.‹ Groensteen discusses a variety of examples of minimalist comics which seek to create »a world of pure drawings without any anthropomorphic reference.« Amongst others, he shows that the miniaturized drawings of Maaike Hartjes and Lewis Trondheim scrutinize the concept of the literary character, and he explains why José Parrondo's *Eggman* can still be considered a character although he does not seek to represent anything but the fact that he is an artificial drawing. Eventually, the author shows that even the ›realistically‹ conceptualized characters in Marion Fayolle's comics foreground their paper qualities. Although all of the examples invent characters which highlight forms and their interaction with their (drawn) backgrounds, Groensteen concludes that our desire for narrative and the anthropological dimension makes us see characters in all kinds of shapes, forms, or dots.

In addition to our special section on non-narrative, the general section of CLOSURE #8 features three further, diverse approaches to the theory and practice of sequential art. In »Graphic Storytelling: Teaching Experience and Utility,« **Darren C. Fisher** explores the social affordances of drawing. He stresses its importance for developing several art forms and its potential for mental health resilience and slow-living skills. Fisher argues that drawing is a fundamental means of human expression, which varies according to age-group or cultural background. His contribution reconceptualizes drawing as »tool of enjoyment« and aims to reunite two binary approaches, namely ›observational drawing‹ and ›memory drawing.‹ In this regard, he critically observes that concepts of drawing such as Csikszentmihalyi's ›flow theory‹ conflict with contemporary norms such as the affinity for all-encompassing productivity. These norms, as Fisher puts it, »are challenging barriers to overcome, particularly in teaching adults to draw.« The article closes with a brief description of how its theoretical premises shaped the design of an online comics workshop held as part of CLOSURE's 2020 International Autumn School.

Barbara M. Eggert's article is entitled »Never Judge a Book by Its Cover? Picturing the Interculturally Challenged Self in the Japanese Journals of European Comics Artists Dirk Schwieger, Inga Steinmetz, and Igort.« She proceeds from the observation that since the 1990s, Japan, as the birthplace of manga and anime, has been attracting many European comics artists who went there for inspiration and/or work. With Dirk Schwieger's *Moresukine* (2006), Igort's *Quaderni giapponesi/Japanese Notebooks* (2015/17), and Inga Steinmetz's *Verliebt in Japan* (2017), this article analyzes and compares three heterogeneous examples concerning their comic-specific depiction of intercultural experiences in Japan. Focusing on self-representation in panels and pages that deal with phenomena such as culture shock and assimilation processes, the paper discusses if, how, and to what effect these autobiographically inspired comics – in spite or because of their varying degrees of fictionalization and comicification – echo and/or contradict some ›classical‹ intercultural adaptation theories. Eggert positions her case studies in the tradition of the travel journal, while at the same time paying close attention to their specific comics-ness – and the »medium-specific possibilities of comics to focus, exaggerate, and to leave things out.« In her detailed account of this mode of intercultural representation, Eggert lay bare the precise affordances of comics in approaching, perceiving, and misperceiving the culture of others.

In » Rhetoric of Images. Emblematic Structures and Craig Thompson's *Habibi*,« **Julia Ingold** examines how the ›rhetoric of images‹ and the figurative nature of text in emblems and comics resemble each other. In the first part of her article, Ingold analyzes select emblems taken from Alciatio's *Emblematum liber* to explore their intricate relation between text and image. More specifically, she attends to the use of metaphors, symbols, and the formation of allegorical entities in emblems. In her reading of *Habibi*, the author expounds the potential of the comics medium. She argues that pictorial narration can use metaphors

and symbols taken from ›the reader's world‹ without implementing them in the diegetic world of the comic. She notes that in comics, »something that is traditionally written, becomes a mimetic drawing, just as in the *picturae* of the emblems.« Ingold eventually identifies two strategies that apply to both emblems and comics: they highlight their own figurativeness and use images like writing in syntactic structures. Emblems and comics scrutinize the function of words and images. Thus, they allow for a new language which, as the author concludes, transforms the invisible into visible images which become rhetoric.

In addition to our articles, CLOSURE #8 features a smorgasbord of reviews, offering in-depth discussions of contemporary comics scholarship, comics, and graphic novels. In our section ›Comic Context,‹ we recap the inaugural CLOSURE Autumn School, which discussed the knowledge inscribed in and mediated by sequential art: ›What Do Comics Know?‹. The section includes a graphic recording by **Tim Eckhorst**, who was not only a workshop leader but also captured the discussions in inimitable style – and thereby created a nonfiction comic that encapsulates some of the ›non-narrative‹ concerns of this issue.

Kiel, November 2021
Cord-Christian Casper and Kerstin Howaldt for the CLOSURE-Team

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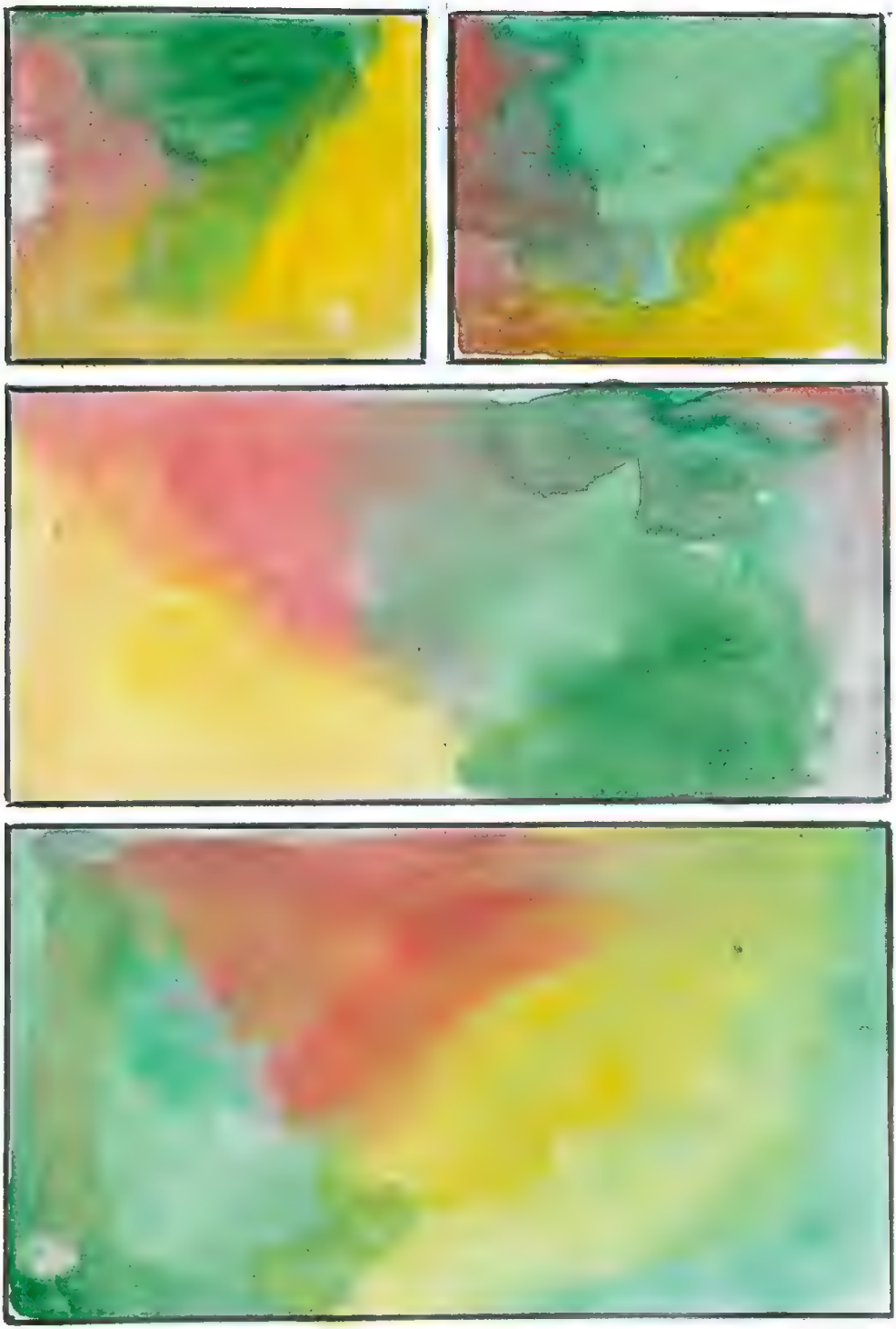
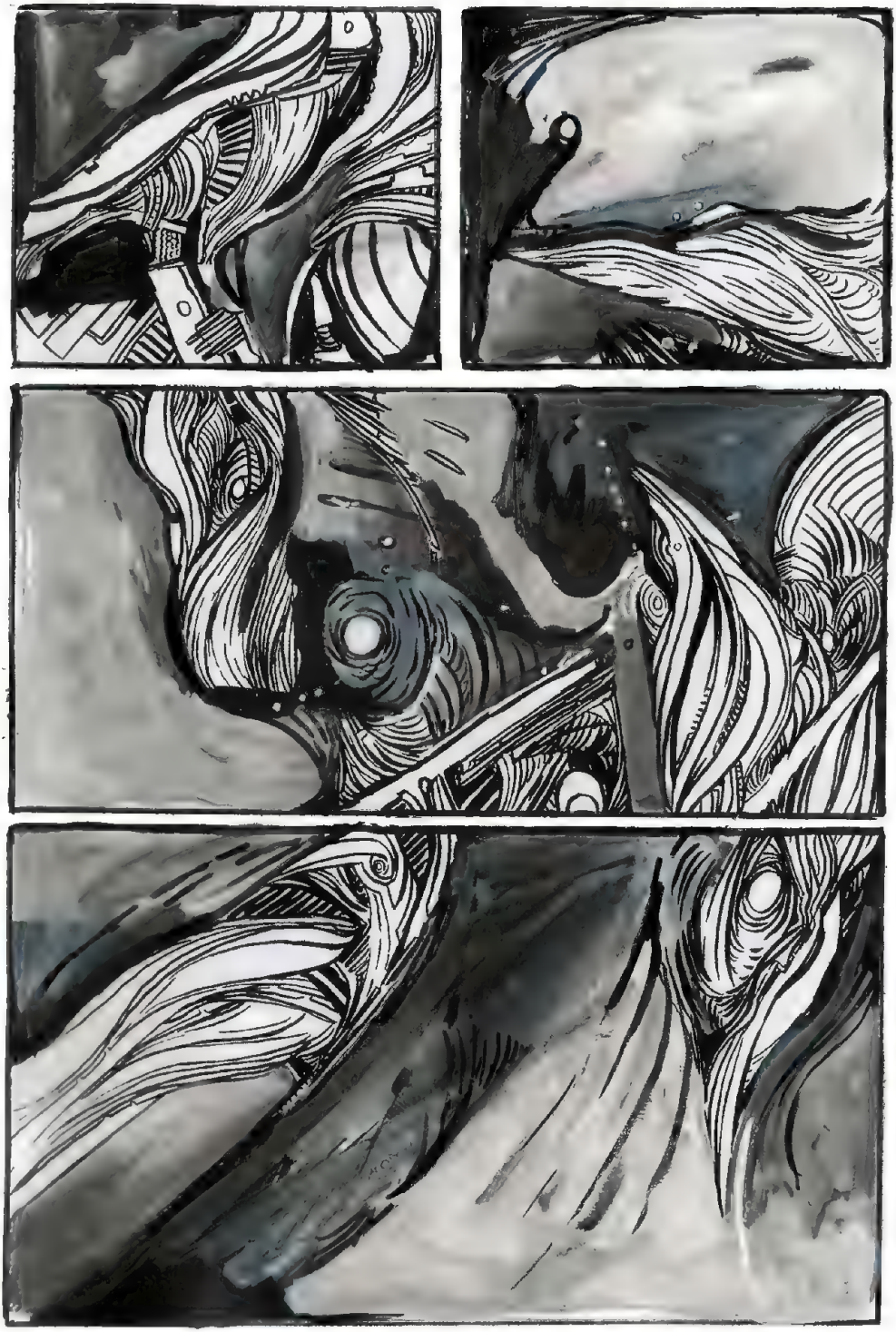
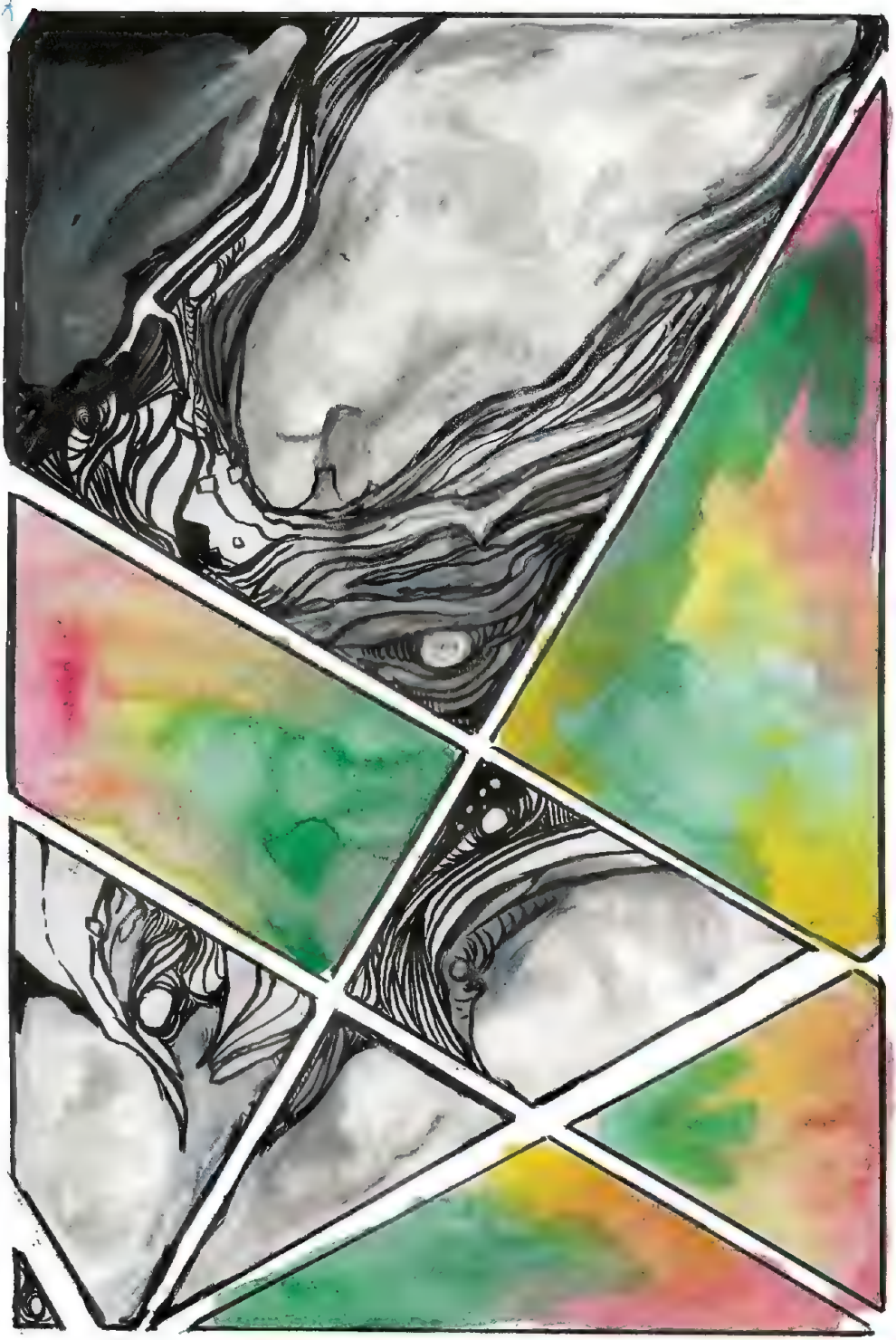
Closure

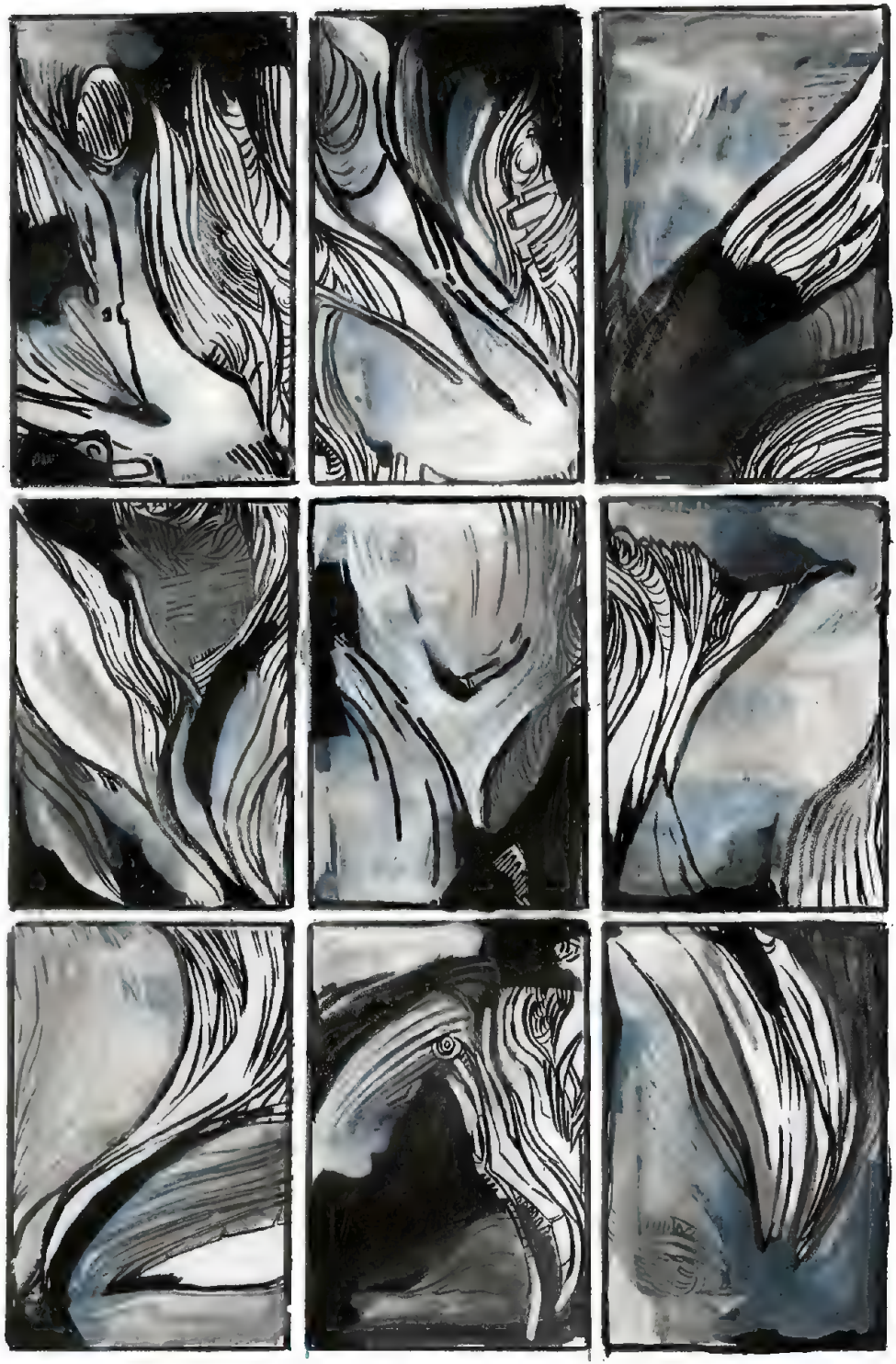
Gareth A Hopkins

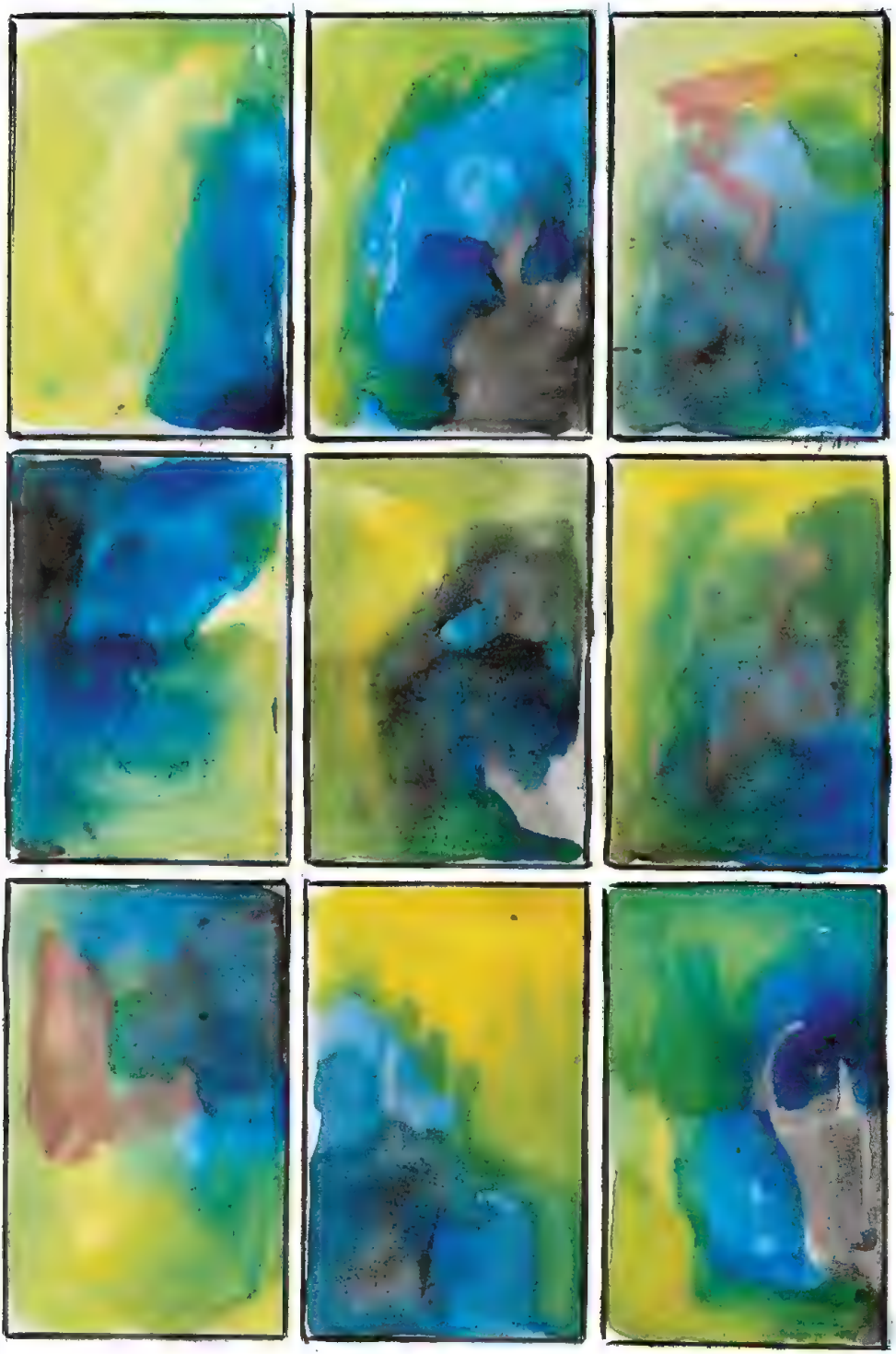
2021

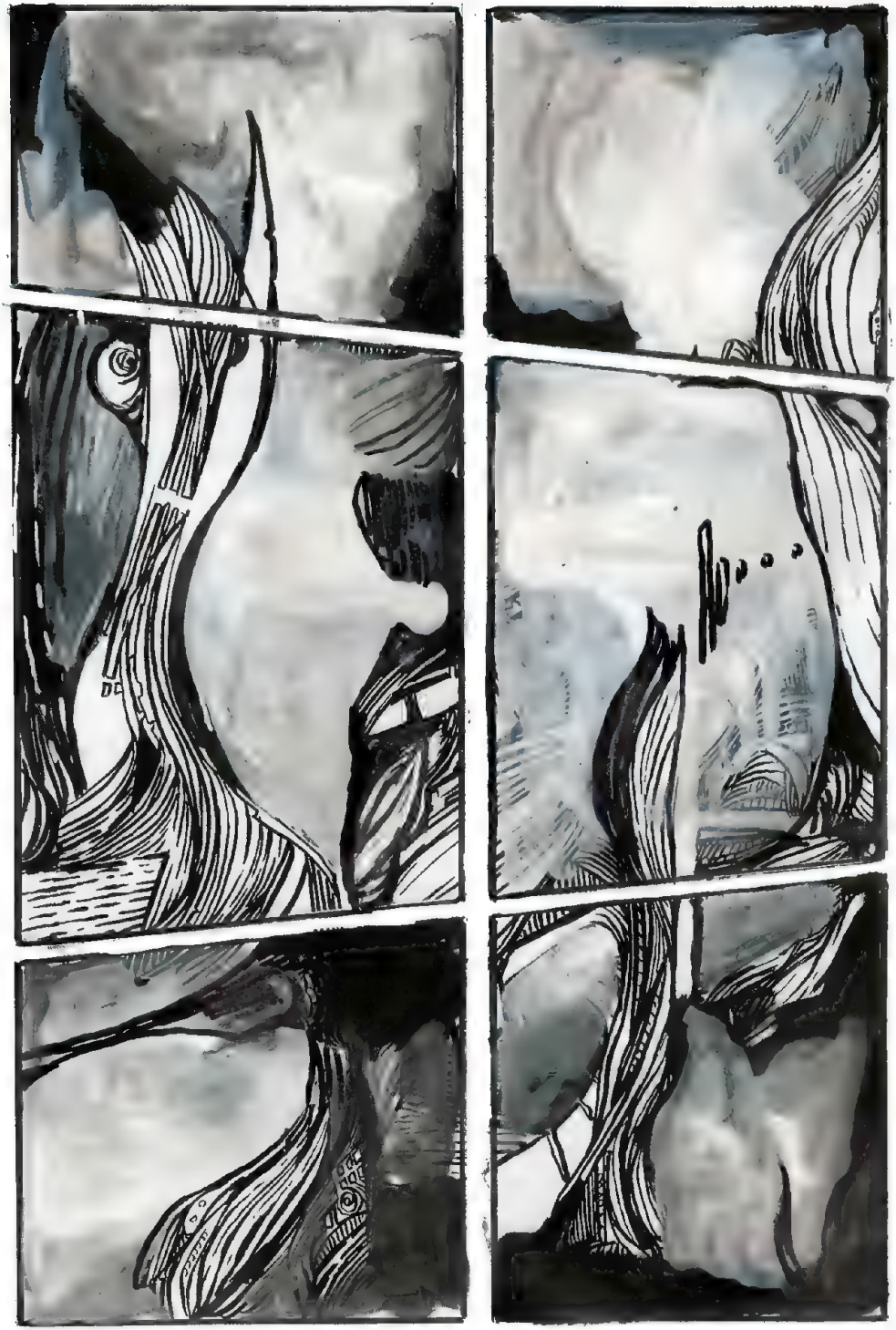


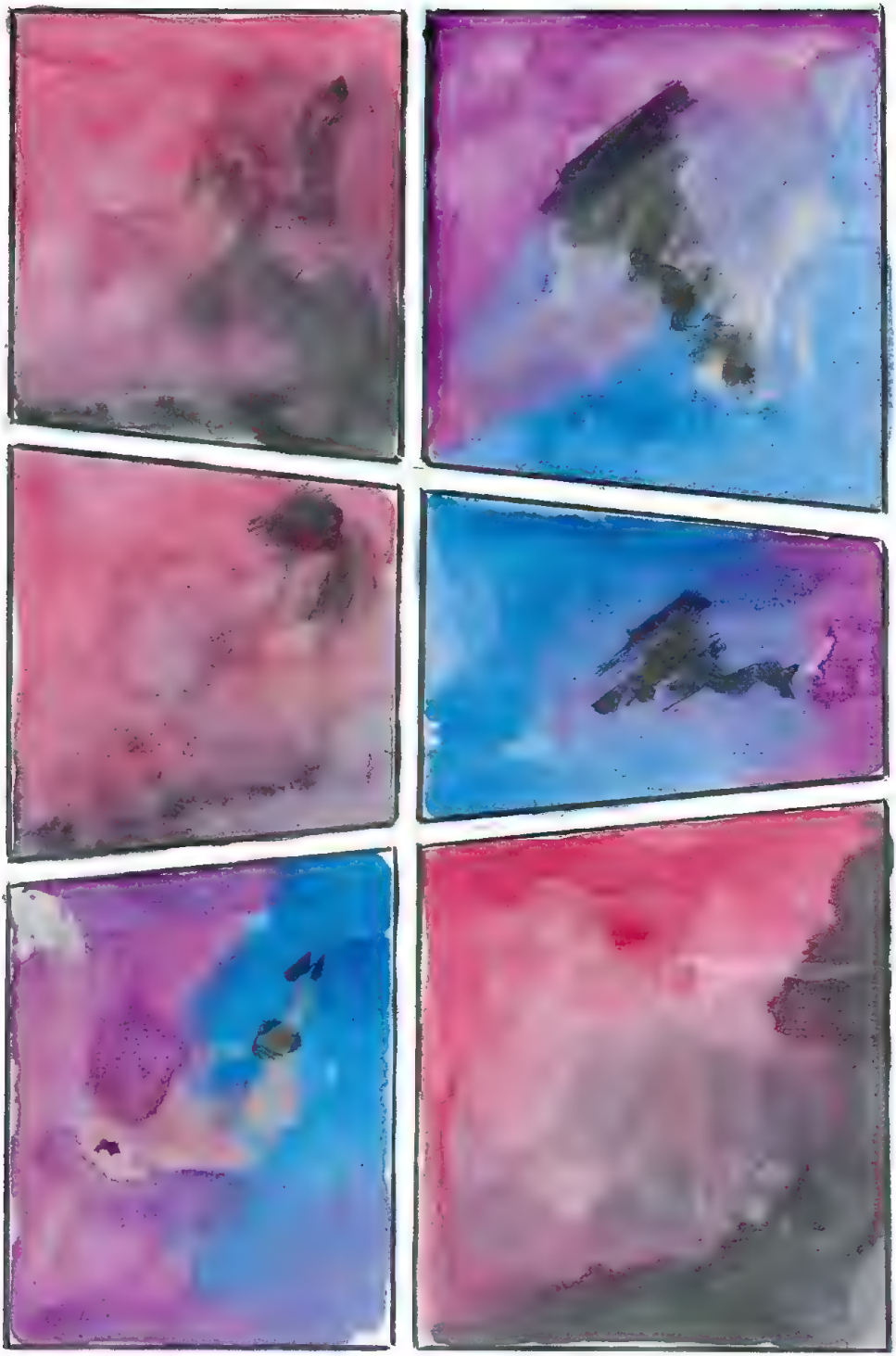












Clo□

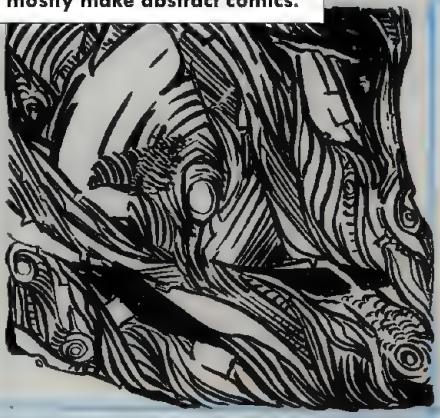
Kiefer-Tourna

Kieler e-Journal für Comicfors

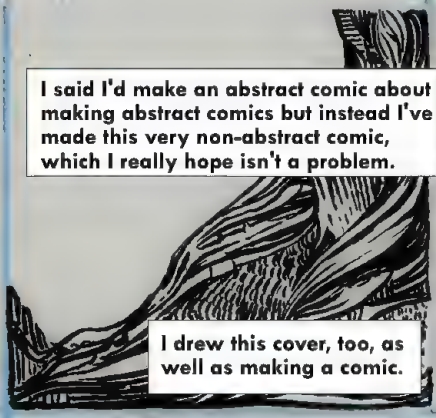
Hi there.

My name's Gareth A Hopkins.

I'm a comics creator and artist, and mostly make abstract comics.



I said I'd make an abstract comic about making abstract comics but instead I've made this very non-abstract comic, which I really hope isn't a problem.

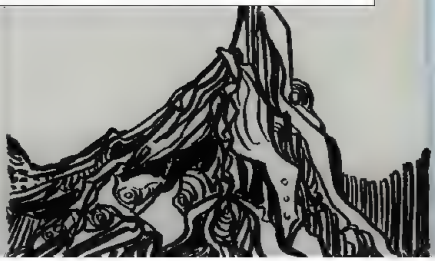


I drew this cover, too, as well as making a comic.

I wanted to use this landscape style, just because I like it.

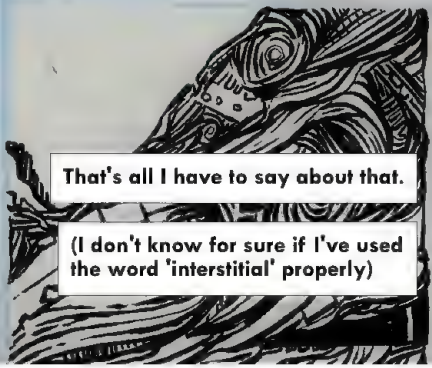
I made it look like a continuous land mass, broken up into panels, except that the bottom left panel doesn't fit that, making the reader question if it really is a single mass.

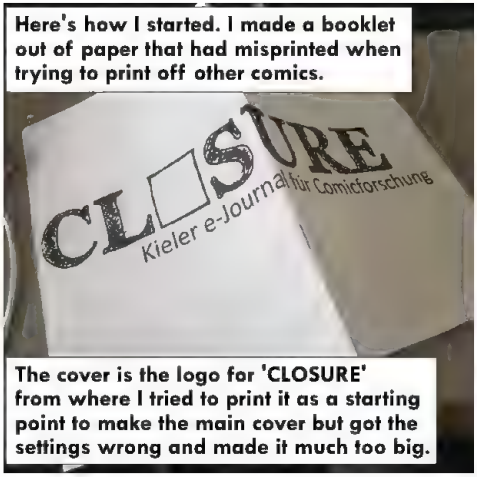
I also left my blue guide lines in, to show the cover in an interstitial state, part way between complete and incomplete.



That's all I have to say about that.

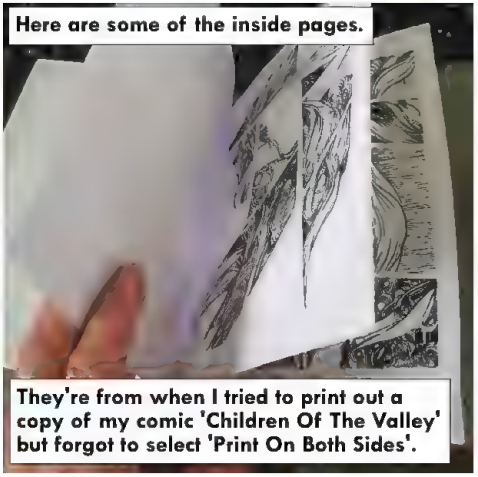
(I don't know for sure if I've used the word 'interstitial' properly)





Here's how I started. I made a booklet out of paper that had misprinted when trying to print off other comics.

The cover is the logo for 'CLOSURE' from where I tried to print it as a starting point to make the main cover but got the settings wrong and made it much too big.



Here are some of the inside pages.

They're from when I tried to print out a copy of my comic 'Children Of The Valley' but forgot to select 'Print On Both Sides'.

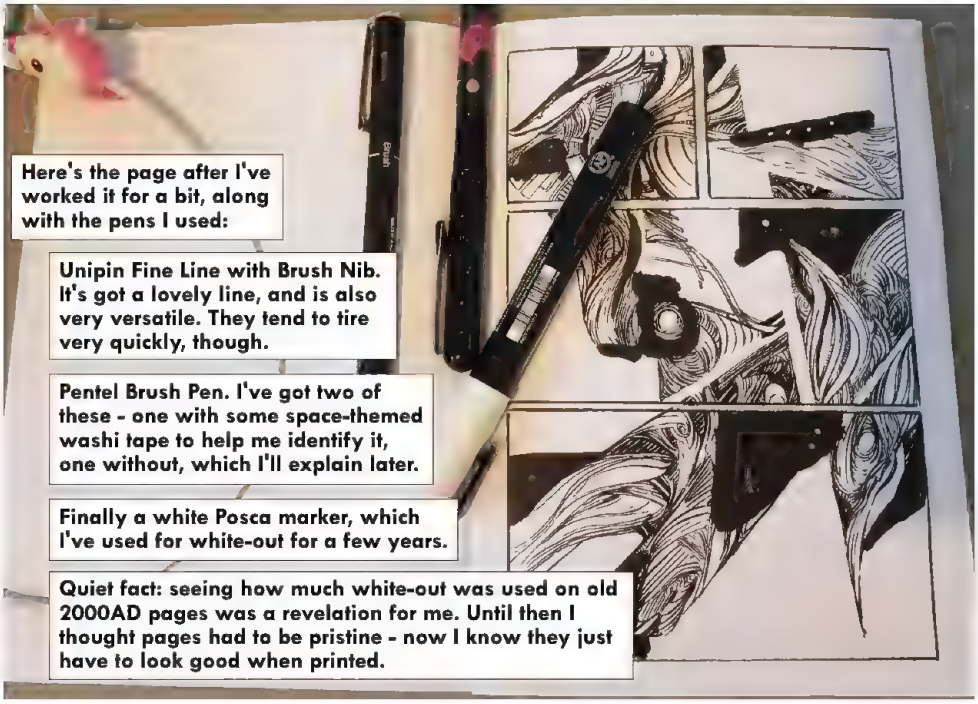
Folding those pages in half meant that I had six pages with black and white line-work on them, and six blank pages. I had no idea what to do with the blank pages, so started to rework the existing pages.

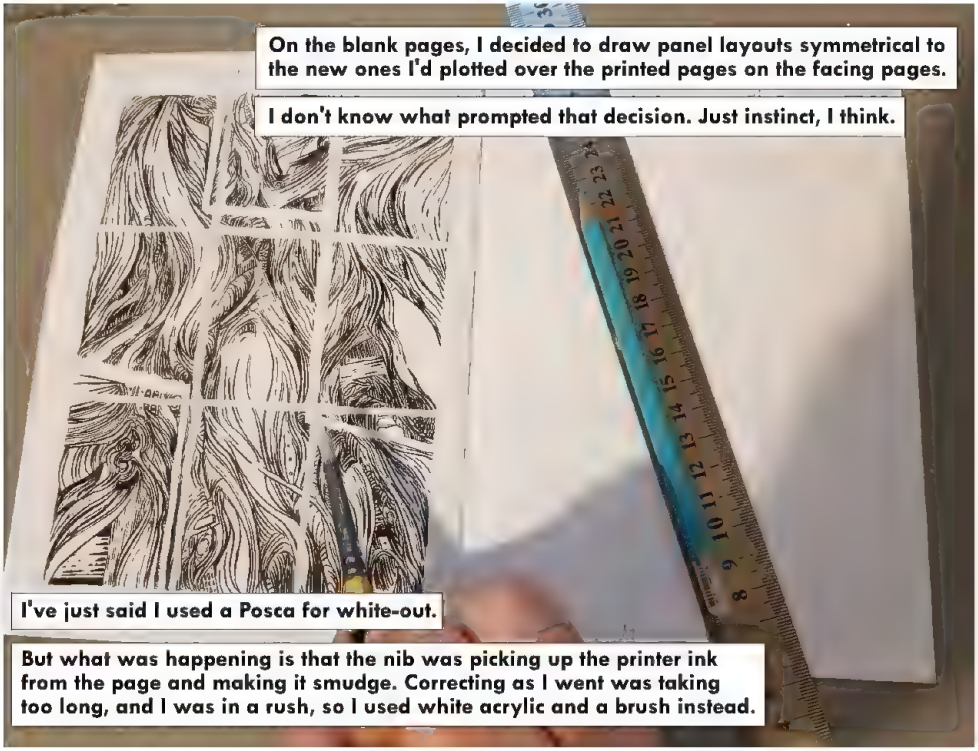
I drew a new grid in blue pencil over the existing page, and then used a white Posca marker to colour the gutters in with white.

When I plot out panel layouts, I tend to keep them pretty plain. I usually work with four, five, six or nine panels on a page, and they tend to be boxes with right-angles.

Plainer panel layouts make it easier for me to control the flow through the page, because they don't distract from the shapes that I put into them.

That's the general rule I follow, anyway.


Here's the page after I've worked it for a bit, along with the pens I used:
Unipin Fine Line with Brush Nib. It's got a lovely line, and is also very versatile. They tend to tire very quickly, though.
Pentel Brush Pen. I've got two of these - one with some space-themed washi tape to help me identify it, one without, which I'll explain later.
Finally a white Posca marker, which I've used for white-out for a few years.
Quiet fact: seeing how much white-out was used on old 2000AD pages was a revelation for me. Until then I thought pages had to be pristine - now I know they just have to look good when printed.

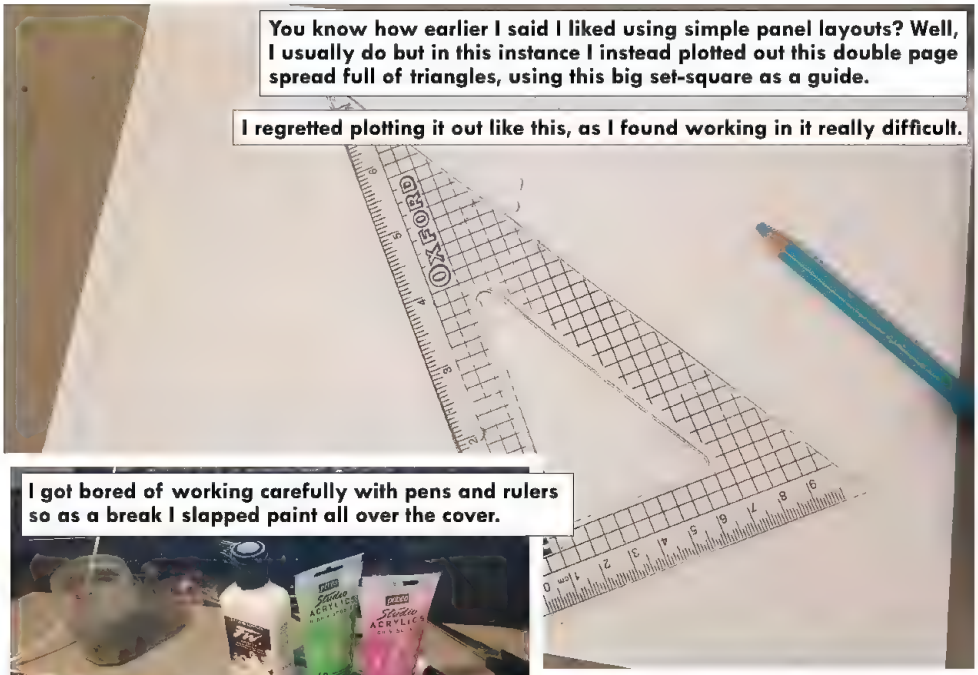

On the blank pages, I decided to draw panel layouts symmetrical to the new ones I'd plotted over the printed pages on the facing pages.
I don't know what prompted that decision. Just instinct, I think.
I've just said I used a Posca for white-out.
But what was happening is that the nib was picking up the printer ink from the page and making it smudge. Correcting as I went was taking too long, and I was in a rush, so I used white acrylic and a brush instead.

Here's a photo of my desk.
I took it when I was still remembering to take photos of my progress.
I hope it's interesting or useful to see how unorganised I am.
Every object here tells a story of its own, but they're all boring so let's move on.

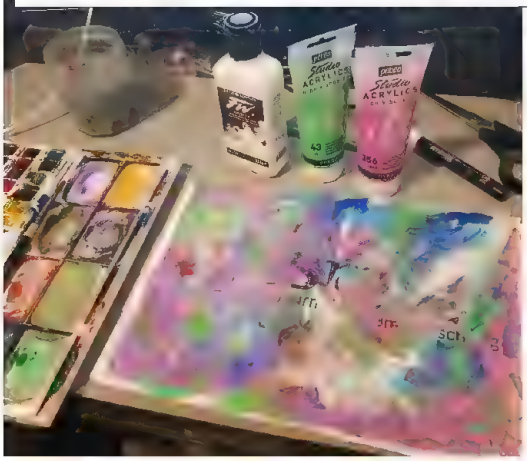
This is a photo of my window sill, and my plants.
The smaller spider plant is a child of the larger one, and the larger one has sprouted a new tendril to create more baby spider plants.
The three other plants are growing from seeds I had left over from eating a pepper at my desk.
When I re-potted them I used the wrong soil (it was soil designed specifically for succulents - cactuses, basically) and it's got pesticides that will make any fruit that comes off them poisonous. That's what my wife reckons, anyway.
This box is where I keep any partly used paper - printer errors, or old homework from my kids, colouring sheets they've tried to throw away. I nearly always use that paper to start new projects - for one, I don't like throwing things away, but also I find it more interesting to work up from existing shapes.

You know how earlier I said I liked using simple panel layouts? Well, I usually do but in this instance I instead plotted out this double page spread full of triangles, using this big set-square as a guide.

I regretted plotting it out like this, as I found working in it really difficult.

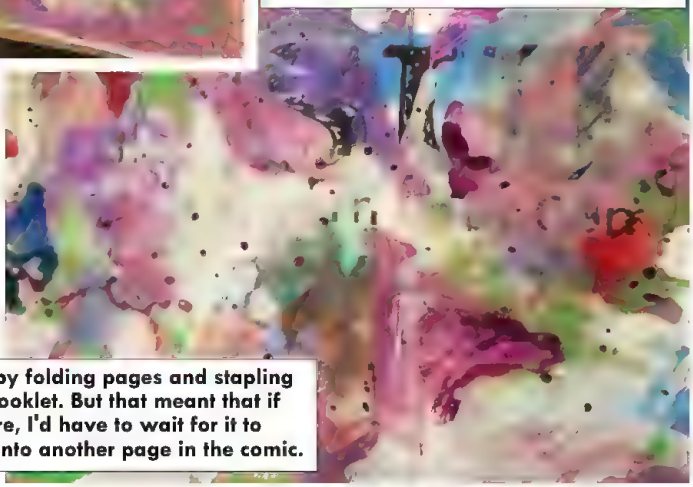


I got bored of working carefully with pens and rulers so as a break I slapped paint all over the cover.



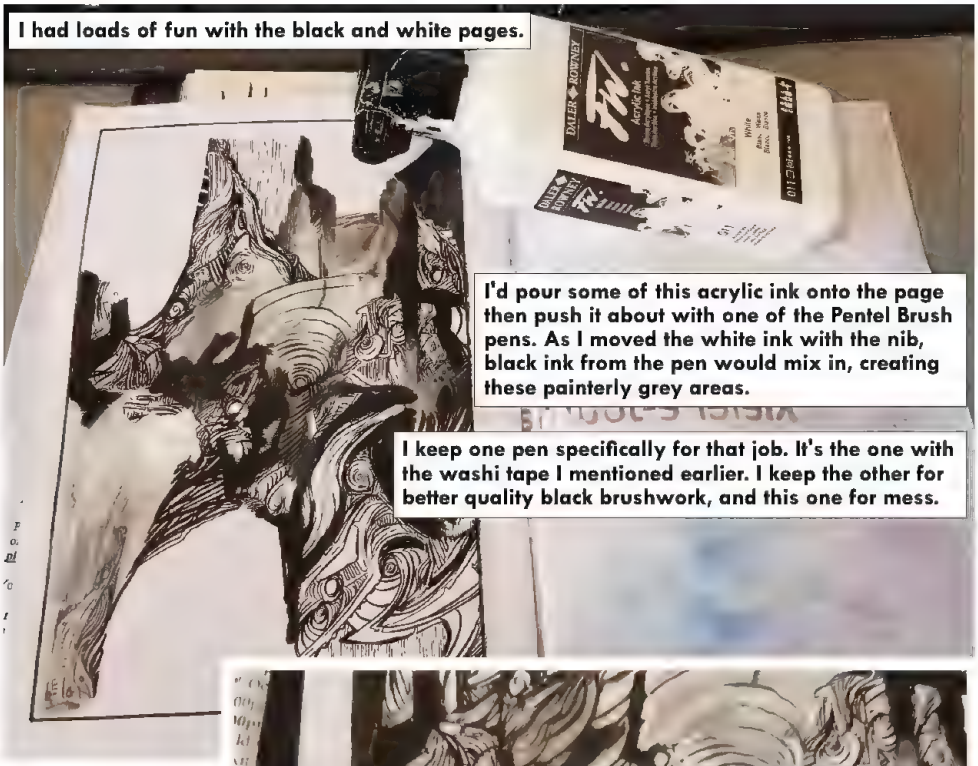
If you've noticed an emerging theme of 'allowing mistakes and bad decisions', let me give you some more examples.

The purple acrylic paint I used here? When I bought it I hadn't realised it was 'iridescent', so all the paintings I've made with it have an extra shimmer to them.



Also, I started this comic by folding pages and stapling them together as a little booklet. But that meant that if I put paint down anywhere, I'd have to wait for it to dry before I could move onto another page in the comic.

I had loads of fun with the black and white pages.

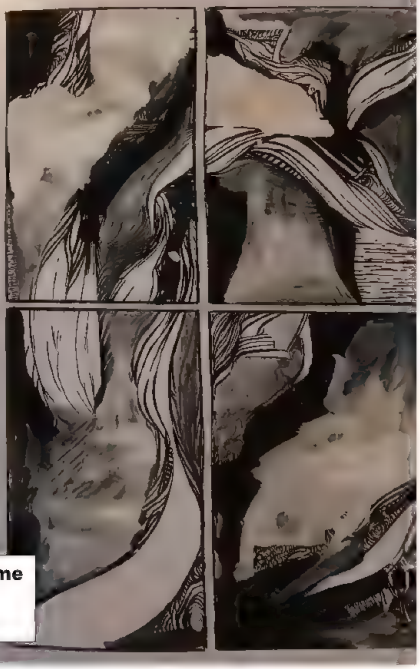


I'd pour some of this acrylic ink onto the page then push it about with one of the Pentel Brush pens. As I moved the white ink with the nib, black ink from the pen would mix in, creating these painterly grey areas.

I keep one pen specifically for that job. It's the one with the washi tape I mentioned earlier. I keep the other for better quality black brushwork, and this one for mess.

It's very hard to capture that process in a photo, but here's my best attempt.

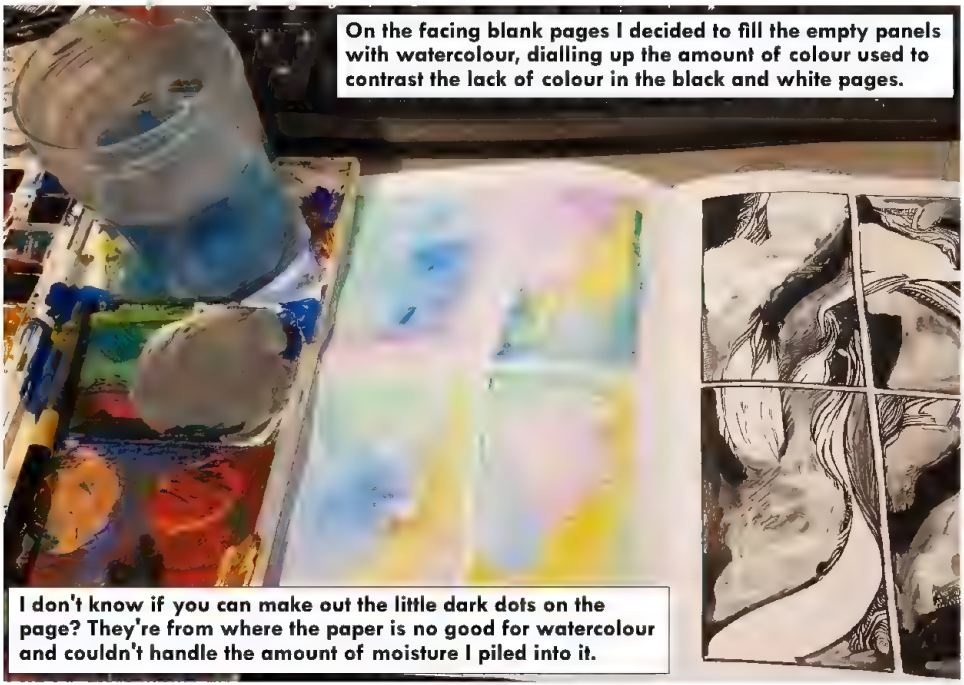
I'm still really excited by how great I think these black and white pages look. They remind me of 1940s cartoons, if you can see what I mean?



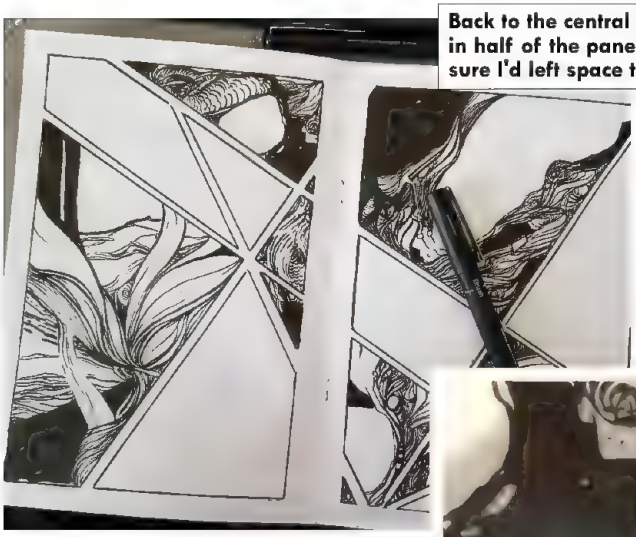
It's very rare for me to look at a page after finishing it and still really enjoy it, rather than just objectively decide if it's good or not.

I say I decide 'objectively' but I don't know how I come to that kind of decision, so it's probably subjective, based solely on my personal taste and not a lot else.

On the facing blank pages I decided to fill the empty panels with watercolour, dialling up the amount of colour used to contrast the lack of colour in the black and white pages.



I don't know if you can make out the little dark dots on the page? They're from where the paper is no good for watercolour and couldn't handle the amount of moisture I piled into it.



Back to the central double-page spread - I filled in half of the panels with black line-work, making sure I'd left space to pour white paint in afterwards.

I got tired of the booklet format forcing me to wait while paint dried, so I took the staples out.

I managed to remember to take a photo of me using a ruler to bend the staples backwards.

This is the last photo I remembered to take before I got so carried away making the comic that I forgot to record making it.

It shows two pages from the comic drying next to each other, possible because I'd taken the staples out. I was clearly very proud of, and excited by, that decision.

Once the comic was finished, I liked it enough to print it out with a view to selling it.

The painted cover wasn't quite enough as it was, so I cut the line-work from the other cover I did and pasted it onto a scan of the painted cover - twice, to make a wrap-around cover.

And that's it, I think?

I can't think of anything else to tell you.

If you get to read the comic I made, I hope you like it.

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Nonnarrative or Noncomics?

(with some notes on *Holz* by Olivier Deprez and Roby Comblain)

Jan Baetens (Leuven)

Abstract: This article deals with the concept of ›nonnarrative‹ in comics. It first discusses pros and cons of the current terminology, and then moves to a semiotic approach (structural as well as tensive semiotics) in order to propose a new take that aims at reintroducing narrative in contexts that seem to exclude it. The second part of the article is devoted to a brief discussion of the work of Oliver Deprez, an experimental woodcut comics and book artist, whose magazine *HOLZ* illustrates some of the most interesting tendencies in today's storytelling.

»Narrative is avoided«

Narrative is not only a textual feature or property, more or less lacking or present in certain works.[1] It is also a universal and subjective desire, inextricably linked with our human need for meaning – and thus also the need to make meaning when it seems missing, unsatisfying or incomplete. In that sense, the search for narrative is a property of our human mind and behavior: we are made to tell stories and to frame our perceptions and experiences in narrative ways in order get a better understanding of the environment we live in as well as in our interaction with it over time.[2] Narrative from this point of view is as basic an impulse as other cognitive mechanisms such as identifying (what is really a ›sign‹ and what is not?), simplifying (of which summarizing and stereotyping are necessary aspects), classifying and interpreting (which includes a lot of guessing and trial and error work), liking or disliking (theory of mind approaches are certainly right in stressing the importance of empathy), etc.

At the same time, narrative is also a danger, for its power may create certain forms of misreading. Narrative is so overwhelming a framework that it tends to make us blind to

other aspects or elements of reality. This is the warning given by Frédéric Salmon in his much-discussed essay on storytelling as a means of political manipulation. However, the suspicion toward narrative's hegemonic power is also at the heart of many writers eager to bring to the fore other aspects of language. As was famously stated by Stéphane Mallarmé in his 1897 Preface to *A Throw of the Dice*, a seminal work in modern poetry but also a major reference for all those trying to avoid the hegemony of narrative (and by the way also a work that has been appropriated by artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, whose ›erased‹ version on transparent paper of the Mallarmé poem deserves to be seen a prefiguration of what we would call today abstract comics):

> The literary value, if I am allowed to say so, of this print-less distance which mentally separates groups of words or words themselves, is to periodically accelerate or slow the movement, the scansion, the sequence even, given one's simultaneous sight of the page: the latter taken as unity, as elsewhere the Verse is or perfect line. Imagination flowers and vanishes, swiftly, following the flow of the writing, round the fragmentary stations of a capitalised phrase introduced by and extended from the title. Everything takes place, in sections, by supposition; narrative is avoided. (quoted from the EPC page edited by Charles Bernstein, 2016; original quotation in Mallarmé, 455)[3]

Narrative here is seen as something that blinds the reader or the viewer, if not the listener, the implicit model of *A Throw of the Dice* being a musical Gesamtkunstwerk, something that wipes out all elements that do not matter to the narrative canvas of the work (see Baetens 2017).

Yet authoritative as it may be, narrative's impact is never absolute. In the comics field, often accused of fostering mere reading for the plot, one can notice the possibility to read against the narrative grain in the critical stances of readers as different as Fredric Wertham, the infamous anti-comic books crusader best known for his campaign against the violent and racist content of comic books which eventually gave birth to the self-censorship of the Comics Code (1954), and Jochen Gerner, a contemporary avant-garde comics author and visual artist who frequently appropriates existing narrative comics in order to critically transform them into noncanonical versions of the original works. In Wertham's analysis of comic books, one notices that he stubbornly interrupts the narrative flow of juvenile comics to lay bare dangerous images hidden underneath the apparent meaning of their narrative representations, reading for instance a close-up of pubic hair in what the story treats as a purely decorative detail (Wertham). As far as Gerner is concerned, one can notice that the artist ›reads through‹ the images and stories of mainstream comics in order to unearth allusions to or even variations on key works of modern painting (see Gerner; for an analysis, see also Carneiro). Any study of narrative in any medium whatsoever has to take into account this fundamental ambivalence: the pressure of narrative is universal, but it is never absolute, and as any hegemonic form it also engenders its own counterhegemonies.

Nonnarrative or Abstract?

The growing awareness of nonnarrative aspects of comics shouldn't make us conclude that comics, speaking in general of course, are not a narrative medium per se. Denying this conventional stance is not only counterintuitive, it is also historically false. Even if it is possible to rewrite the history of the medium through another lens than that of narrative, the bulk of what has been and continues to be published is clearly narrative comics. Besides, although the focus on nonnarrative may highlight the existence of all kinds of nonmainstream work, it does not say anything on what is actually meant by this other (›alternative‹, ›experimental‹, ›avant-garde‹, ›abstract‹…) production. When it comes down to actually defining nonnarrative comics, one often finds references to three different possibilities: metafiction, poetry, abstraction.

The first case, metafiction or self-reflective fiction, is a term used to designate works, generally brief ones within the larger tradition of the gag strip, that exploit the narrative layer of a work in order to achieve a different goal, namely the thematization of a formal or semantic characteristic of the medium. A simple and widely used example is the literal clash between the fictional body of a character and the material border of the frame – a blatant case of metalepsis, the paradoxical transgression of the boundaries between narrative levels or logically distinct worlds, which we know to be key mechanism of metafiction (Kukkonen, Thoss). Narrative is still present here, but it becomes secondary, a mere instrument in the pursuit of an aesthetic agenda that aims at unveiling the medium instead of just telling a story.

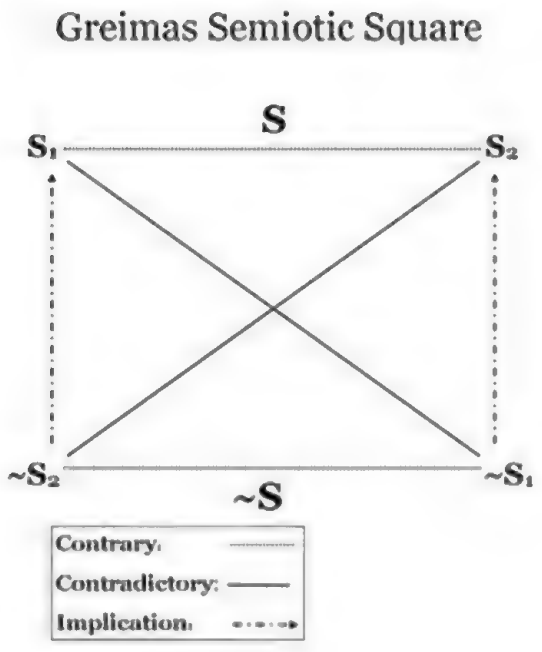
The second case, poetry, that is a form of comics that aims at offering the comic counterpart of poetry in literature, is also not a matter of discarding or ignoring the narrative dimension of comics. It rather redefines the classic hierarchical relationship between form (as a tool) and content (as a goal). In graphic poetry or more precisely comics as poetry – not to be reduced to the sole exercise of transposing an existing poetic text to the medium of comics – what dominates is the poetic function as theorized by Roman Jakobson, that is the aesthetic strategy that invites or forces readers to attend to the signifier in linguistic signs, away from the signified (see Surdiacourt and Bennett). As one immediately notices, the relationship with narrative is not really different from what characterizes the work being done under the umbrella of metafiction, although the features foregrounded in comics as poetry are at the same time broader and more linked with the materiality of the work, covering the whole spectrum of the ›plastic‹ sign as described by the Groupe Mu (1992).[4] Contrary to the features processed by metafiction, those underlying the poetic mode of comics are not necessarily medium specific in the narrow sense of the word. Another difference with metafictional comics is that comics as poetry are often close to other media and formats. The line is very thin for instance between graphic poetry and illustration as well as visual art in general (it will be necessary to return to this point of medium trouble later on).

The third case, finally, that of abstract comics, is without any doubt the best known and most frequently applied in this domain. Here as well, however, narrative is anything but absent, on the contrary, as stressed by both authors and critics who all concur in stressing the narrative dimension of visual rhythm and thus to suggest a kind of nonfigurative narrative, not via the events and transformations of real or fictional characters but with the help of material forms and features (see Molotiu and Wolk). A less expected, for generally considered ›literary‹ and not comics, example would be the sequential drawings by Henri Michaux, who called his graphic notations (wordless) ›signs‹ and who emphasized the rhythmic effects of their accumulation. This kind of graphic series does not tell a story, yet its rhythmic pulse has the look and feel of something that expands in time (Michaux).

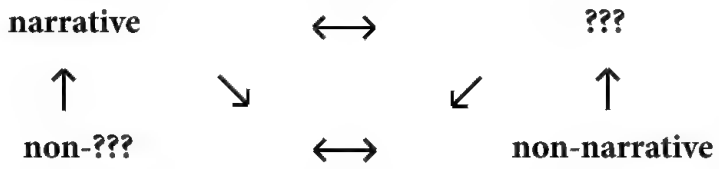
As this short overview makes clear, the possible identification of a nonnarrative corpus remains unsatisfying from a theoretical point of view. True, it helps gather a certain number of works, all clearly detached from the common trunk of mainstream narrative comics, yet it does not specify in any way what nonnarrative actually means. A more theoretical framing is therefore needed, and semiotics can prove a helpful instrument in this regard.

Semiotic Intermezzo

With the help of a semiotic square[5] it is possible to get a better grasp of the semantics of nonnarrative.

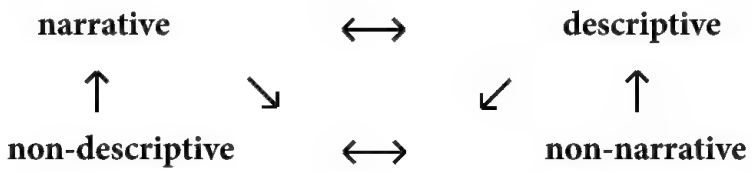


In semiotics, the term nonnarrative is, technically speaking, the *contradictory* term of the term narrative (›contradictory‹, since it is logically impossible to be at the same time x and non-x). It is placed on the so-called ›subcontrary axis‹ (that is the lower horizontal axis ›-S2/-S1‹ in the figure above) and forces us to specify what is generally bypassed or discarded when we stick to the sole opposition between narrative and nonnarrative, namely a definition of what is the conceptual contrary term of narrative at the level of the so-called ›contrary axis‹ (contrary and not contradictory, for it is possible to be both at the same time):



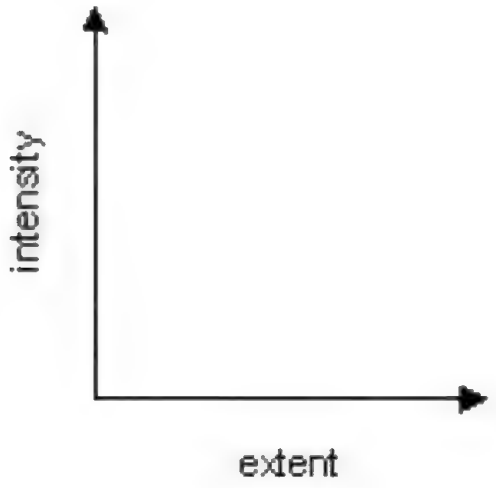
At first sight, it is tempting to argue that the term ›abstraction‹ qualifies as the best possible solution to define the contrary term of ›narrative‹. However, such an opposition is based on a typical category mistake: abstract is not the contrary of narrative but of figurative, and both abstract and figurative are perfectly compatible with narrative as well as nonnarrative (Baetens 2011). As a matter of fact, the opposition abstract vs figurative refers to the (higher) level of the units or elements involved in larger narrative structures. It should therefore not come as a surprise that there exists something we intuitively might define as ›abstract narrative‹ (the emphasis on the sequential and thus narrative dimension of nonfigurative elements is a key argument of Molotiu in his defense of abstract comics), just as it is perfectly understandable that figuration does not suffice to produce narrative in the traditional sense of the words (as shown for instance in major figurative comics such as Martin Vaughn James's *The Cage* (1986) that escape all forms of traditional storytelling).

Another opposition is therefore necessary and the best possible candidate is narrative vs descriptive – perhaps an old-fashioned terminology, but actually a fundamental and simply unavoidable instrument of any kind of narratological analysis. By the way: another and I think very important argument in favor of this proposal is that it liberates the analysis from endless and thus sterile discussions on the various synonyms or parasynonyms of nonnarrative: anarrative, antinarrative, postnarrative, counternarrative, paranarrative, dysnarrative, pseudonarrative, etc.



The two initial contrary terms, narrative and descriptive, don't need much further explanation (and it is always a good thing to start a semiotic analysis with an elementary opposition such as day vs night or man vs woman). The two subcontrary terms, which serve as intermediary positions when a given term morphs into its contrary term (when man becomes woman or the other way round, for instance), can be understood as follows: nonnarrative refers to narrative structures that are losing their narrative dimension; nonnarrative is, if one prefers, narrative running out of steam. Nondescriptive refers to descriptive mechanism that progressively develop a certain narrative dimension (see Ricardou 1973 for an analysis of this back and forth between narration and description).

The conceptual mapping of the semiotic square is of course a very general one, which merely frames, but does not explain in detail what happens during specific, always subjective, and context sensitive interpretations. In a second step, one has therefore to introduce elements of context and subjectivity and examine the way in which questions of nonnarrative are actually received by sign users. Tensive semiotics (Fontanille, Hébert), which analyzes the embodied reactions to a given sign (in this case nonnarrative signs) describes this reaction along two axes: a quantitative one (which is the ›extent‹, big or small of the perceived sign) and a qualitative one (which is its impact or is the ›intensity‹, high or low?). The combination of these two axes gives a first but nuanced idea of the way in which a sign is interpreted, and its structure is generally presented in a four quadrant square whose point of departure is the perceiving body:



A more detailed use of this scheme also includes a temporal dimension, since the initial position of a certain sign can move from one quadrant to another over time. As far as non-

narrative is concerned, the notion of extent has to do with the relationship between part and whole. Works can be totally nonnarrative, from A to Z, at all possible levels, or just partially nonnarrative, with only details or fragments escaping narrative and moreover with the possibility of having a mix of narrative and nonnarrative aspects or dimensions within each detail or fragment. The notion of intensity presents other types of nuances. Nonnarrative qualitative signs can have a stronger or weaker impact, according to a wide range of textual and contextual features: a nonnarrative image or passage at the beginning of a work may provoke a strong reaction in the case or readers who are expecting a traditional narrative, but when confronted with for instance long descriptive passages in the middle of a work the same readers may be tempted to simply skip these passages so that the intensity of the nonnarrative signs remains very low, etc.

What definitely comes to the fore is that there is never an essentialist reading of nonnarrative. Nonnarrative is not just a property of certain signs or sign clusters, it is also a matter of interpretation. This act of interpretation is however neither purely subjective nor totally arbitrary. Any subjective interpretation involving the personal preferences, background, education, etc., of the reader is always counterbalanced by institution and contextual factors (peer pressure, influence of reading environment, time and space of reading, previous experiences, for example). At the same time, any interpretation is also dependent on objective properties of the work, although never in a strictly determinist way (see Eco). Hence the necessity to carefully examine the elements that make nonnarrative *possible*. As already mentioned, narrative is an influential cognitive mechanism that humans gladly apply in their role as meaning-making beings. Narrative in that sense is more natural than nonnarrative: it is the default option, whereas nonnarrative is the alternative one.[6] Nonnarrative can thus only appear if certain elements allow it to do so.

Roughly speaking, two textual strategies, regardless of their makers' intentions and functioning either separately or in combination with each other, can help understand the appearance of the alternative, nonnarrative reading (see Ricardou 1972, whom I am reinterpreting here in a free, but I hope, relevant way). First of all, there is the strategy of narrative failure, if not active sabotage of the narrative dimension of the work. When something turns out wrong, narratively speaking, these insufficiencies may trigger a nonnarrative reading. This is for instance what can be observed when the story is clumsily told or too complex to be understood, when it is boring or sillily formulaic, etc. Second, there is also the emphasis on nonnarrative mechanisms and procedures, which can reinforce the impact of the first strategy of failure or sabotage of the narrative itself, but which in certain circumstances proves strong enough the tackle the narrative and figurative elements that are present in the work. This occurs for instance when the aesthetic qualities of the drawings of a comic are so rich and intriguing that the reader can prefer to ignore the story, which is then no more than an alibi for something else, for instance

the exhibition of beautiful or ugly bodies. A good example here is the already mentioned graphic novel *The Cage* (Vaughn-James), where the foregrounding of the basic components of drawing (dots, lines, ink, position on the page etc.) are so powerful that readers may tend to disregard the actual figurative and narrative content of the book, which displays the metamorphoses of such elementary forms as much as it tells the story of a building. The combination of narrative failure and nonnarrative achievement can suspend or even block the natural narrative deciphering of a work, but here as well it should be repeated that both suspension and blocking are processes that take place in time: they can be either temporary or final, while rereading can lead to different interpretations – all phenomena that are perfectly in line with the already mentioned refusal of any essentialist interpretations of nonnarrative signs.

Nonnarrative Comics as a New Medium

However, the semantic analysis put forward thanks to semiotics brings us only halfway. Comics are material objects and no analysis should overlook this fundamental given. As material items, comics are not a genre, but a medium, that is a materially based social practice that relies on a network of tightly knit – and according to some theoreticians such as Stanley Cavell even ›automatic‹ – relationships between three aspects. First, a host medium, that is the material channel that structures and conveys the message: in comics, the host medium can be analog (print) or digital, but also two-dimensional or three-dimensional, such as in the case of an exhibition (though a book or a newspaper is no less a 3D volume!). Second, a type of signs: comics generally bring together words and images, but their intermediality is much broader than the mere interplay of verbal and visual: ink has a smell, screens are to be touched, for example. Third, a special distinct content: traditional comics tend for example to ignore autobiography, whereas contemporary graphic novels heavily concentrate on self-narratives. It is the awareness, conscious or unconscious, of the links between these three elements (host medium, sign, content) and its subsequent application and use (even if it is always possible to try to ›break the rules‹) that constitute a medium as social practice (see Baetens 2014).

If nonnarrative has to be a structure that exceeds the sole function of rhetorical device or aesthetic gadget (and there is of course nothing wrong with that), it should appear that it has a real impact on how the comics medium is defined, reworked, transformed, in short remediated. Yet this is exactly what nonnarrative comics is all about.

As argued by Sébastien Conard in his introduction to a remarkable volume of practice-based and theory-oriented contributions in the field of experimental comics (here called ›post-comics‹):

> So, what are post-comics? As several contributors in this volume show, they are not only related to the formal aspects of (alternative) comics, but they generally reflect an outspoken *artistic* take or even a full-fledged *avant-gardist* vision on the graphic novel. They also entail a good deal of abstraction, without necessarily fitting into the ›genre‹ of abstract comics. If anything, these post-comics extrapolate the artistic potential of ›the ninth art‹ towards new objects and practices: one can call them transmedial, interdisciplinary, meta-medial… depending on what is being stressed. These objects are often books but not the kind that are easily identified as comics or graphic novels. Akin to artist's publications, post-comics question the boundaries of what is a comic, an illustrated book, a piece of visual storytelling and so forth. Post-comics also come as expositions, installations, performances or participative designs. (Conard, 9; emphasis by the author).

The key word of the argument is deterritorialization, as one easily imagines, and I have quoted this text at length because it displays with utmost clarity what is at stake. Post-comics are not simply ›other‹ comics, be they alternative, abstract, avant-garde, experimental, etc., but a form of comics that dismantle media boundaries, inviting users, that is creators, intermediaries, and readers, to radically rethink what comics *can be* (and thus not only what comics are) and even more what they *can do* (the being of comics is defined by comics' practices, not the other way round). It also applies to comics: *meaning is use.*

Holz: Noncomics' New Narratives in Time and Space

A lifelong author of the Belgian avant-garde comics group Frémok (aka FRMK), Oliver Deprez is a key reference in the study of nonnarrative comics (Baetens 2011 and 2019). His recent production, often in collaboration with Roby Comblain, represent however an important new phase in the exploration of nonnarrative comics in an expanded field that departs from comics without being limited by it. One of the perhaps paradoxical results of Deprez's experiments is that the work on noncomics produces opportunities for new forms of narrative and storytelling. These new narratives may be surprising and unconventional, perhaps light years away from what is normally understood as narrative, but they can in no way be reduced to an aggression toward the idea and the practice of narrative.

Deprez's commitment to the domain of noncomics is not a denial or negation of comics. It is instead a foundational work that aims at displacing the major components of the medium (host medium, sign, content) as well as their integration into a new medium, comics-based but not exclusively comics-oriented. This work and commitment are a process of trial and error, and it may therefore be useful to remember some previous attempts and experiments by Olivier Deprez before giving a brief presentation of what currently represents the most advanced step in his creative practice, *Holz*, an ongoing project in collaboration with visual designer Roby Comblain, which is at the same time a performance, an exhibition and a publication (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Performance HOLZ#1/i Printing of the woodcuts of HOLZ during the Post-Comics event at KASK Ghent (22 October 2020).

From the very beginning of his work, Deprez has critically questioned the traditional automatisms of comics and comics making. The most noticeable aspect of this endeavor was of course his choice of a less conventional type of signs: woodcut engravings instead of drawings. This choice did not also enable him to establish new connections with an almost forgotten but nowadays once again quite visible and present tradition, that of the silent woodcut novel of the 1910s and 1920s (Beronå). It also helped him ask questions on the very status of the image in comics. On the one hand, and this is an important contribution to the woodcut novel tradition, Deprez's work does not shy away from abstraction (in the sense of the nonfigurative). This acceptation of abstraction is a strategy that is efficient and meaningful. It exceeds the field of the single image (where abstraction has now become mainstream and totally aseptic) in order to occupy that of the sequentially arranged images (and here abstraction can reclaim once again its critical potential, certainly in combination with images that remain partially or totally figurative). On the other hand, Deprez does not treat his woodcuts as ›original‹ engravings: they are not

meant to be exhibited as artworks in a gallery or a museum, but to be reproduced in print format. The real work is not the woodcut, but the book, a significative difference with the status of woodcuts in the institutional sphere of gallery and museum art.

Next to his work on the comics ›sign‹, there is also, and from the very start, a strong attempt to explore a wider range of ›host media‹. The material channel of Olivier Deprez's comics art is not only the book, but it can take very different forms which show that print, which remains a fundamental dimension of his creative work, is not necessarily limited to print on paper and print for books.[7] Other forms of print and other forms of publication (in the literal sense of making available for the reader or the spectator) are systematically explored. This is shown, for instance, in the print performance *blackbookblack*, where Deprez, in collaboration with Miles O'Shea and Alexia De Visscher, performs a life event, the output of which is the manual printing of a totally black book to be exhibited (and eventually archived) by a commissioning library.[8] Designed and staged by Roby Comblain, the exhibition *WREK NOT WORK* at the Bibliotheca Wittockiana in Brussels (29 Sept. 2019-20 Jan. 2020)[9] is a further step in this effort, which attempts to blur the boundaries between the artist's workshop (including his personal library and an overview of his literary and pictorial influences), the actual production of woodcut prints (all ›recycled‹, that is unoriginal but subjectively redrawn images, as a creative variation on the found footage aesthetics) and the montage of these results in a *work in progress* setting serving as a laboratory for an eventual (and at the moment of the exhibit still hypothetical) publication in book format.

Finally, Deprez's work also innovates at the level of content, more precisely in the way narrative works. The ambition of the artist is not to produce images that are totally new. Instead he gives a strong priority to the reuse and recycling of already existing material, such as for instance the documentary movies by Dziga Vertov (a director who shows that it is perfectly possible to make something new out of material that is already there) and Ernie Bushmiller historical comics serial *Nancy* (a character whose ordinary activities – picking up rubbish in the street and providing it with a new life and meaning at home – can be read as a metaphor of Deprez's creative intervention in the found footage aesthetics). But these ›old‹ images give birth to completely new forms of narrative, hovering between pure standstill, each image becoming a world in itself, and sequential variations, each set of related images triggering open narratives that are both different from the series that precede or follow it and similar to them in that all these series foreground rhythmical correspondences between the images that compose them.

It is perhaps the untranslatable and polysemic French term *dispositif* (Ortel, Hanna) that is most appropriated to bring together these different aspects of Deprez's work and, more generally, of all comics that aim at going beyond the traditional way of making and reading comics. The notion of *dispositif* (should we say ›setting‹ or ›staging‹ in English?) refers

to the fact that a text, and in this case a comic, cannot be separated from the many forms and levels of the material and institutional context in which it appears or is performed. All works by Olivier Deprez have clearly such a *dispositif* as their horizon, but it is perhaps with the journal *HOLZ* that the link with both the classic world of comics in print and the expanded field of noncomics finds it most challenging venue (Baetens 2021).

The principle of *Holz* (the German word for *wood*) is very simple. *Holz* is a journal with no strict publication schedule that distinguishes itself from the general field of magazine and woodcut art by the following material features: a small number of pages (between twelve and sixteen), a very large (almost poster) format, an extremely thin paper (10 grams per square meter, whereas the usual paper weight varies between 90 and 120). Yet this singular materiality, which make the object difficult to produce (in practice, it is only made ›on demand‹, that is when there is a private or institutional buyer) is part of a larger project that can be seen as the provisional synthesis of Deprez's progressive move from nonconventional comics to real noncomics art (Fig. 2)

Four elements come here to the fore. First of all, the craving for a book presentation that is itself an installation, that is the transformation of the pages on display into a new work of art. The scenography by Roby Comblain succeeds in doing so, by creating an overall montage that transforms the juxtaposed and transparent pages into a single image that establishes a

Fig. 2:. Installation HOLZ at the exhibit *Un pied dedans une main dehors*, studio Roby Comblain, Brussels, October 2020.

dialogue with the characteristics of the hosting environment. Second, the attempt to enlarge the act of reading, which acquires here a strong visual as well as haptic dimension: the words and images of the printed woodcuts are not only there to be read and to be seen, but the delicate materiality of the host medium, which is not fixed on the wall, but freely floating in space, like in ›cordel literature‹, becomes a substantial part of the experience. Third, a more elaborated fictional thematization of the processes of making and reading. In Deprez's work, several characters are printmakers, woodcut artists, but also readers (reading is no less important than writing and drawing; reading becomes almost a kind of curation), and the various pieces of *HOLZ* put a strong emphasis on that metafictional dimension (Fig. 3). Fourth, the increasing presence of narrative, be it in the individual texts and images or at the level of the trajectories and paths that lead the reader from one silk page to the other. Although radically distant from any form of beginning, middle, and end, preferably in that order, *HOLZ* makes a substantial contribution to the flowering of a new narrative mode. This mode merges micronarrative (in certain cases perhaps even nano-narratives) and subjectively associated meanderings starting from well-known historical themes, figures, and icons. All viewers can decline and appropriate these associations according to their own interests and concerns, while never losing touch with the Great Canon (provided one includes both high-brow and low-brow items and networks).

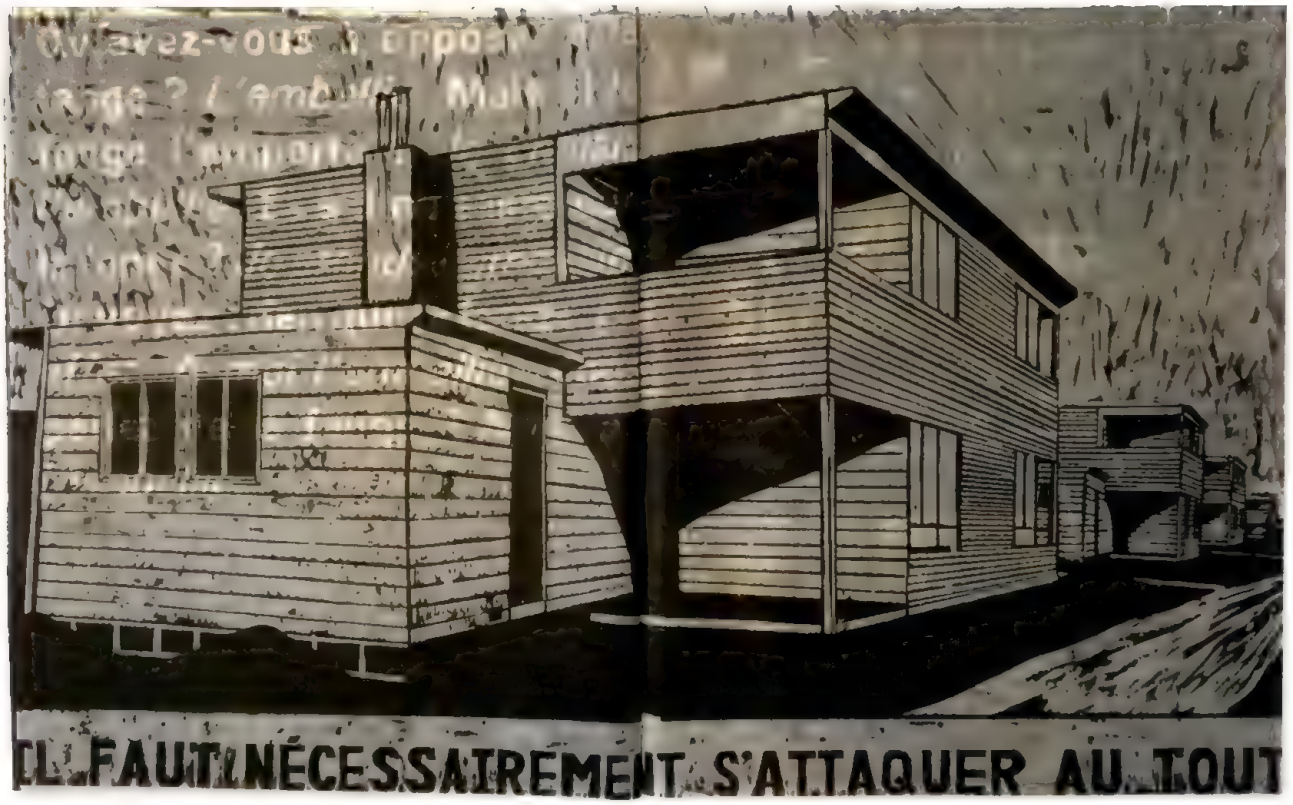


Fig. 3: Woodcuts HOLZ#2, p. 20-21, Brussels, 2020.

Holz, an example of nonnarrative comics? Yes, without any doubt. At the same time, however, the project also demonstrates that the prefix ›non‹ has to be seen as a springboard, not as an enterprise of undermining and rejection. It opens the path for new forms of storytelling, where the boundaries between process and result, writing and drawing, making and experiencing, tend to vanish. Deprez's noncomics are definitely examples of new forms of narrative.

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Fig. 3: Woodcuts HOLZ#2, p. 20–21, Brussels, 2020.

1] See Baetens (2011) on the notion of »degrees of narrative«.

2] Kermode (2000) remains an excellent example of a quasi-anthropological reading of narrative as a mechanism bestowing a structure of beginning, middle and end upon the apparent chaos of our lives.

3] Original: »L'avantage, si j'ai droit à le dire, littéraire, de cette distance copiée qui mentalement sépare des groupes de mots ou les mots entre eux, semble d'accélérer tantôt et de ralentir le mouvement, le scandant, l'intimant même selon une vision simultanée de la Page : celle-ci prise pour unité comme l'est autre part le Vers ou ligne parfaite. La fiction affleurera et se dissipera, vite, d'après la mobilité de l'écrit, autour des arrêts fragmentaires d'une phrase capitale dès le titre introduite et continuée. Tout se passe, par raccourci, en hypothèse ; on évite le récit.« (Mallarmé 1945, 455).

4] »Groupe μ observes that each of the three plastic systems that it defines – the system of texture, the system of color and the system of plastic form – is determined by its own set of basic factors. These factors are called, respectively, texturemes (»texturèmes«), coloremes (»chromèmes«) and formemes (»formèmes«). The number of texturemes are said to be two, namely the »textural element« (as for example a brushstroke) and textural repetition (as for example the repetition of brushstrokes). The number of coloremes are said to be three, namely chroma (»dominance«), brightness (»luminance«) and saturation (»saturation«). The number of formemes are likewise said to be three, namely position, dimension (i.e. size) and orientation.« (Andersson 210, n.p.).

5] Quoted from Wikipedia commons: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotic_square.

6] To avoid any confusion, I would like to stress that the word »natural« does not involve any link with the debate on so-called »unnatural narratology« (Alber, Nielsen and Richardson 2010). Unnatural narratives may challenge our usual ways of thinking the world, but they never cease to be narratives.

7] In quite some cases, more specifically in the context of contemporary multimedia poetry, see Hirschi et al., 2017), experiments like these are associated with the notion of »non-book«, but this terminology has however regrettably negative connotations, tending to present the book as a kind of obstacle to be deleted.

8] More details here: https://www.fremok.org/site.php?type=P&id=140

9] Some details can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=492132231690450&ref=watch_permalink. The building of the exhibition has been filmed by François Goderniaux. Some pictures can be accessed here: https://antiste.wordpress.com/2019/09/30/quelques-images-de-lexposition-wrek-not-work/

CLOSURE
Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung

Waiting (2018) for the ›Good Life‹ with Adriana Lozano

Andrea Aramburú Villavisencio (Cambridge)

»To inherit feminism can mean to inherit sadness«
Sara Ahmed

This essay looks at *Waiting* (2018) by Colombian Adriana Lozano Román, a comic (in the broadest sense of the term) that collects portraits of individuals, most of whom present as feminine, who seem sad. Lozano, together with other artists such as Powerpaola and Sofía La Watson, gave birth to the alternative feminist comics scene in Latin America, whose comics are known for their naive style and autobiographical subjects. *Waiting* is her first book of pencil-coloured portraits; it was published by Amsterdam's *Terry Bleu* in 2018 and consists of 48 pages, riso printed in Arcoprint Milk 1.5 paper, using 3 colours. In a recent interview for the online website *It's Nice That*, Lozano declared that it was a road trip through the south of the USA that inspired her collection. In this journey, she kept seeing people by themselves, subsumed by a »thrilling boredom« (Alagiah). Performing this hesitant boredom, her characters, of all ages and skin colours, seem to be waiting for *something*: One stares at the ›camera‹, waiting by the phone; one rests inside a heart shaped pool; another eats a burger meal from a tray, her eyes closed.

The lines that follow will discuss the aesthetic expressions of the practice of waiting in Lozano's comic. My argument will be twofold and will be divided across five sections and a brief conclusion, where I will propose that the wait is articulated in two opposite directions. The first three sections *(An Invisible Disturbance, Models of the Good Life* and *Sadness as Public Feeling)* will examine how the comic contests the act of waiting in its more common, optimistic meaning, that of waiting for better times to come. Following this, the last two sections (*The Wandering Reader* and *Reclining Bodies*) will consider how the comic also imagines the wait as revolutionary, encouraging the reader to see waiting as an action that can be fulfilling in itself and thereby renouncing the dynamics and requirements of the society.

Sara Ahmed's concept of the ›good life‹ will be an important theoretical compass guiding these reflections. In her acclaimed monograph *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed defines the ›good life‹ as the normative models of family, community and sociality sustaining the hegemonic social order. According to her, individuals are required to orientate towards these structures for their lives to be considered worthy of happiness (Ahmed, 6). Following these ideas, this essay proposes that Lozano's *Waiting* both articulates and shatters the ambivalent attachments which construct the ›good life‹ and its promises by rendering its inner workings within the comics surface. If for Ahmed, reading what happiness does and how it binds to orientations, objects and attachments implies »reading the grammar of this ambivalence« (Ahmed, 6), what follows looks into how the spatialisation of the wait as a site of contradictory affective investments organises *Waiting*'s unhappy archive.

An Invisible Disturbance

Before delving into the representations and criticisms that the comic makes of the ›good life‹, it is important to clarify what is understood by the *spatialisation* of the wait. To do so, first, one must consider that the action of waiting is above all a temporal concept which conceives time as slowing down. Yet waiting can also be pondered upon for its spatiality. As Harold Schweizer writes, for the waiter, space magnifies: »If technological acceleration increasingly compresses space, for the person who waits, space tediously expands and time slows down« (Schweizer, 8). The feeling of space wearingly expanding is more affective and embodied than factual, and as such is hard to pin down verbally. But, because comics as a medium tend to have a »spatial syntax« (Chute, 4), they are particularly adequate to evoke it. By this, I mean that comics use the flatness of the page to both temporalise and represent reality. Lozano's *Waiting* is an example of a comic that presents the wait in its spatial dimensions, producing a feeling of mounting unease that does not resolve in any narrative outcome.

A close-up of an ashtray with some cigarette ends opens *Waiting*. The first few portraits that follow show women in resting positions, a few of them smoking (Figure 1). There are no texts or captions, other than the words these women have written as tattoos on their bodies. The drawings, each unframed and measuring 170 x 120 mm, fill the whole page, leaving no gutter or blank spaces. As seen in the portraits selected for Figure 1, taken by themselves or together, the scenes pictured do not add up to a narrative plot. Indeed, what story can we infer from a character with a blank stare leaning slightly on a counter? One can certainly intuit some details of their meanderings through their postures and gestures, or from the objects they have nearby, but in general, nothing seems to be happening, echoing comics scholar Greice Schneider's book on comics and the

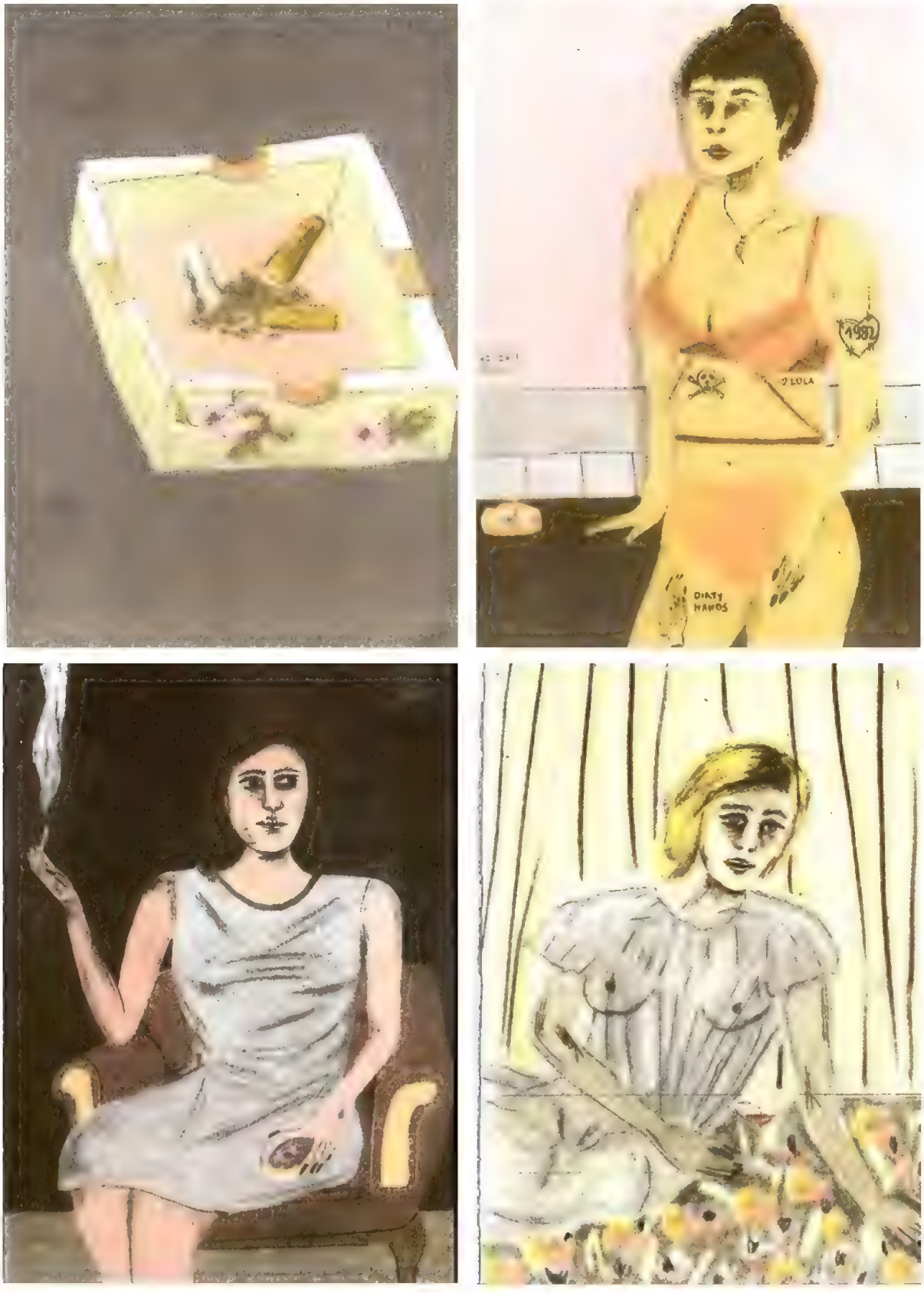

Fig. 1: A mounting atmosphere of unease. Portraits from *Waiting*, p.[2], p.[3], p.[4], p.[7].

everyday, *What Happens when Nothing Happens*. Despite the lack of plot, *Waiting* does produce some sort of atmospheric tension, a feeling supported by the characters' immobility within the frames they inhabit. Lozano performs a sort of picture-writing »that tries to stick with something« of this lack of action, of this perpetual wait as it is »becoming atmospheric« (Stewart, 452).

It is also this »becoming atmospheric«, to use Kathleen Stewart's words, that which prompts us to consider the wait in spatial terms. Cultural theorist Ben Anderson's term of »affective atmospheres« might prove useful to explain this point. Anderson uses this expression to refer to collective affect which resists full capture by the recipient, and that seems to be held together by an inconclusive »relation of tension« (Anderson, 80). His formulation seems appropriate to refer to the practice of waiting, especially regarding how it has been read in scholarly definitions, that is, as affectively indeterminate. The wait, as Schweizer remarks, resists »description and analysis« (Schweizer, 1); it lacks a proper ›plot‹ and mostly offers repetition. Perhaps this explains why, as a social phenomenon, the practice has not received extensive academic attention, with a few studies mostly focusing on the relationship between the politics of waiting and the workings of the state, taking it as a »technology of governance« where »power is effectuated through its exercise over other people's time« (Janeja and Bandak, 4).[1] Whereas this approach emphasises the temporal dimensions of the wait, to look at the practice through its affective atmospheres allows us to think it through spatial lenses.

Finally, Lozano's *Waiting* manifests the spatialisation of the wait through the practice of repetition. While the situations shown might, for all that one knows, belong to different temporal/spatial moments, the repetition of the same stagnant atmosphere evokes an uncertain feeling of uncanniness. Here, I gesture towards Freud's oft-cited notion that names the affect that emerges as the familiar becomes strange. As the reader encounters the same scene again and again – women who seem sad sitting down, some smoking; others staring blankly – what could be read as a banal situation begins to be tainted with a mounting sensation of unease, with no end in sight. The immeasurability of this feeling is exacerbated by the lack of gutters, the blank space we often find connecting panels in sequential comics. With no gutters, these are single panels that take up the entire page and that are instead connected in their boundlessness. The book's blurb on the back cover confirms the presence of a sinister feeling engulfing Lozano's subjects, writing that »all the characters in this series are related to a permanent uncomfortable field, as if [they] were under the effects of an invisible disturbance linked more than anything to the emotional dimension« (Lozano). As readers, it is the effect of this invisible disturbance that reaches us, like an affective atmosphere produced by a fragmented yet continuous stream of unbelonging. What one assumes the characters are doing – waiting, as the title suggests – begins to be delineated spatially by this invisible disturbance.

Models of the ›Good Life‹

In this context, as a reader, one also begins to wonder the reasons behind these characters' sad wait. The comic does not offer the reader many clues regarding their backgrounds, with only a few scattered references creating a sort of realistic context for their lives. To give an example, shown in Figure 2 are a portrait which features a poster of Stephen King's *The Langoliers*, a novella included in the author's 1990 collection, and a second drawing which shows a character wearing a t-shirt that reads »Fire walk with me«, gesturing to David Lynch's 1992 film that serves as prequel to his well-known cult show *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991). Finally, Figure 2 also displays the only portrait in the series featuring a masculine presenting character, with a poster hanging behind them, a huge cover of a playboy 2001 exemplar featuring American actress Pamela Anderson, famous for starring in the 90s show *Baywatch*, wearing a bikini and holding a gun. By using western pop culture references, specifically belonging to the United States, the comic places the protagonists somewhere between the 90s and early noughties, in relation to a western culture that at the time was largely imagined around the popularisation of media, the exposure of certain bodies and the commodity. As Frederic Jameson writes in his ground-breaking essay *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, this was a time characterised by »the transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents« (Jameson, 20).

Taken in this manner, it seems that Lozano's series – a set of snapshots of characters engaging in leisure activities mostly in domestic settings – could be parodying the genre of the woman's magazines, as commercialised during the late twentieth century in the northern

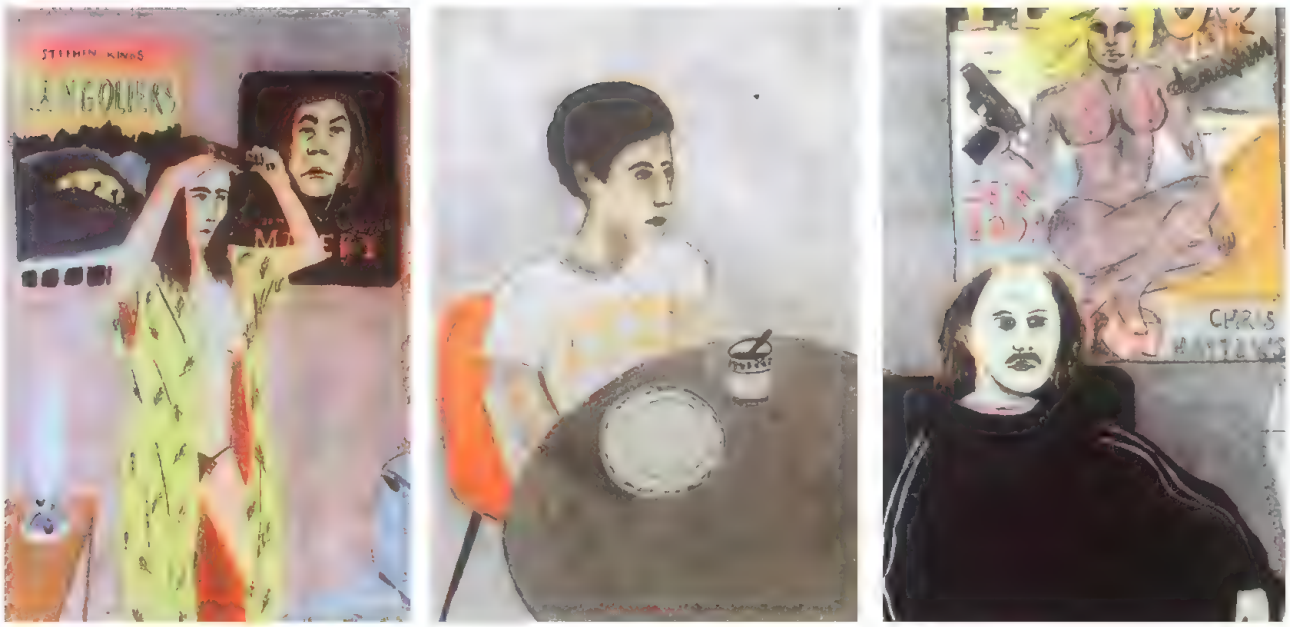

Fig. 2: From the 90s to the noughties: Pop-culture references featuring *The Langoliers*, *Twin Peaks* and Pamela Anderson in the cover of *Playboy*. Portraits from *Waiting* p.[26], p.[34], p.[12].

hemisphere. Though, because these characters are presented as sad, perhaps it would be more appropriate to use the term pastiche, a form of »parody that has lost its sense of humour« (Jameson, 5). As stated by Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer and Sandra Hebron in their study of the woman's magazine in the UK, around 1988, the magazines had mostly abandoned building their discourses around »narrative fictions«, and rather consisted of lifestyle snapshots revolving around the display of the commodity (171). For these scholars, in the 90s, women's magazines continued being »bearers of particular discourses of femininity (domesticity, glamour, maternity)« (130), and instituted »the hegemonic power of middle-class values and white femininity« (172).

Like the UK 90s magazines, *Waiting* eludes constructing a narrative fiction around its characters, and instead centres on the display of the body surrounded by commodities. An example can be found in Figure 3, which features a character wearing a *Coors Light* t-shirt, a beer brand that became popular around the late 70s, or one can even turn to the Pamela Anderson's poster shown earlier (see Figure 2), where the actress' semi naked body is aligned with the possession of a commodity (a gun, in this particular case). This picture is especially interesting because the gun does not offer the woman any particular power; instead, it is there to fit with the porn magazine's expected audience and their misogynistic fantasies, where ›guns and girls‹ co-exist only to fulfil the desires of men.

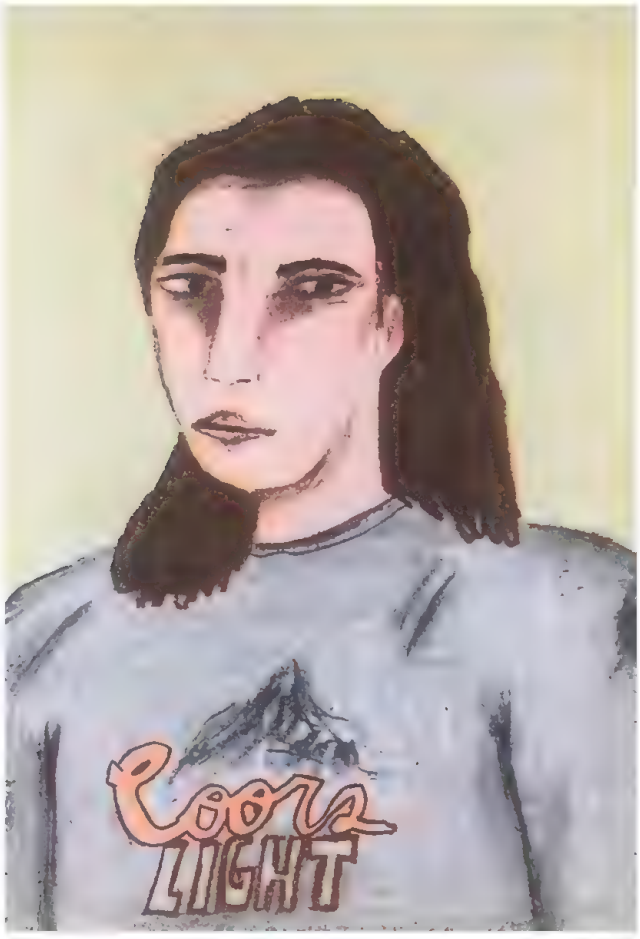

Fig. 3: The era of the commodity. Portrait of character wearing *Coors Light* t-shirt, in *Waiting*, p. [17].

The above contextualisation can begin to offer us some clues regarding the invisible disturbance haunting Lozano's characters: these characters are not happy about the lives the media has assigned them to live. When viewed from this angle, the title given to the book – *Waiting* – gains a different nuance. To advance such a claim, it is worth revisiting Ahmed's theorisations. Ahmed uses the expression of ›the promise of happiness‹ to refer to the mechanism by which the ›good life‹ operates; she writes: »[the good life] is what makes some things promising, as if to share in things is to share in happiness« (Ahmed, 30). In her terms, one is on the right path to happi-

ness as long as one orients without deviation towards the objects of the ›good life‹, which she also calls ›happy objects‹, these being a hegemonic identity or career path, the construction of a family or the idea of maternity, to give a few examples. In this formulation, happiness is articulated as direction, and its realisation is conditional on one being on the right track towards these normative objects or objectives.

So, it is here that the title becomes particularly illuminating. Although in the women's magazine at the time the ideals of good living – heteronormative, white, middle-class – are shown as the key to happiness, in reality the image is only a projection that tells us that if we have all those things at hand then we will certainly be happy; in their discourse, the white bourgeois body and the commodity are the bearers of such a promise. The wait, and especially the repetitive and uncanny wait, then, is constructed as the other side of the promise of happiness: It reveals the disconnection between the objects of the good life and actual happiness. The title, *Waiting*, shows the illusory structure that sustains the ›good life‹, the lifestyle models promoted by the 90s women's magazine, for example.

The portrait on page [31], shown on Figure 4, presents a scene that could be read as the stability of this promise graphically breaking down. The image plays with the scale and perspective of the objects as they gravitate around the character; the ashtray and the cigarettes shown previously in other portraits (see Figure 1) have been rescaled, highlighting their centrality, even their dominance as ›characters‹ within the frame. In a nightmarish affective atmosphere, subject and object seem to be subsumed into each other. The invisible disturbance, as materialised in this portrait's uncertainty, is a step towards the recognition of the good life's illusory wait and its perpetual present.

Fig. 4: A nightmarish affective atmosphere. Portrait from *Waiting*, p. [31].

If naming her collection with the title of *Waiting* achieves such critique, there are other ways in which the comic defies the workings of

the ›good life‹. As opposed to the characters populating the 90s women's magazine, most of Lozano's protagonists contest normative beauty and body standards, especially those that were held in the 90s; for instance, the characters explicitly lift their arms to show their armpit hair. Moreover, her selection does not discriminate according to age – naked portraits of older women are placed alongside those of younger ones –, or race.

The meta play with the frames carried out in some portraits is key to illustrate this point. Let's take a look at Figure 5. Here, page [45] shows a black woman wearing a bikini sitting down, drinking. Behind her, there is a poster picturing a white woman mimicking the same sitting posture. Page [37] inverts this distribution: it shows a white woman sitting with a poster of a black woman behind. The comic suggests that subjectivity is moulded on the basis of images popularised by the media, hence the posters found behind many of these characters. These images challenge the white, heteronormative and young body by framing and reframing the characters interchangeably. If the frame inside the frame presents us with a model of identification, the play with positionality shows that any of them is worth of occupying such space. The images to which the characters look up, furthermore, contrast with the model of femininity promoted by the

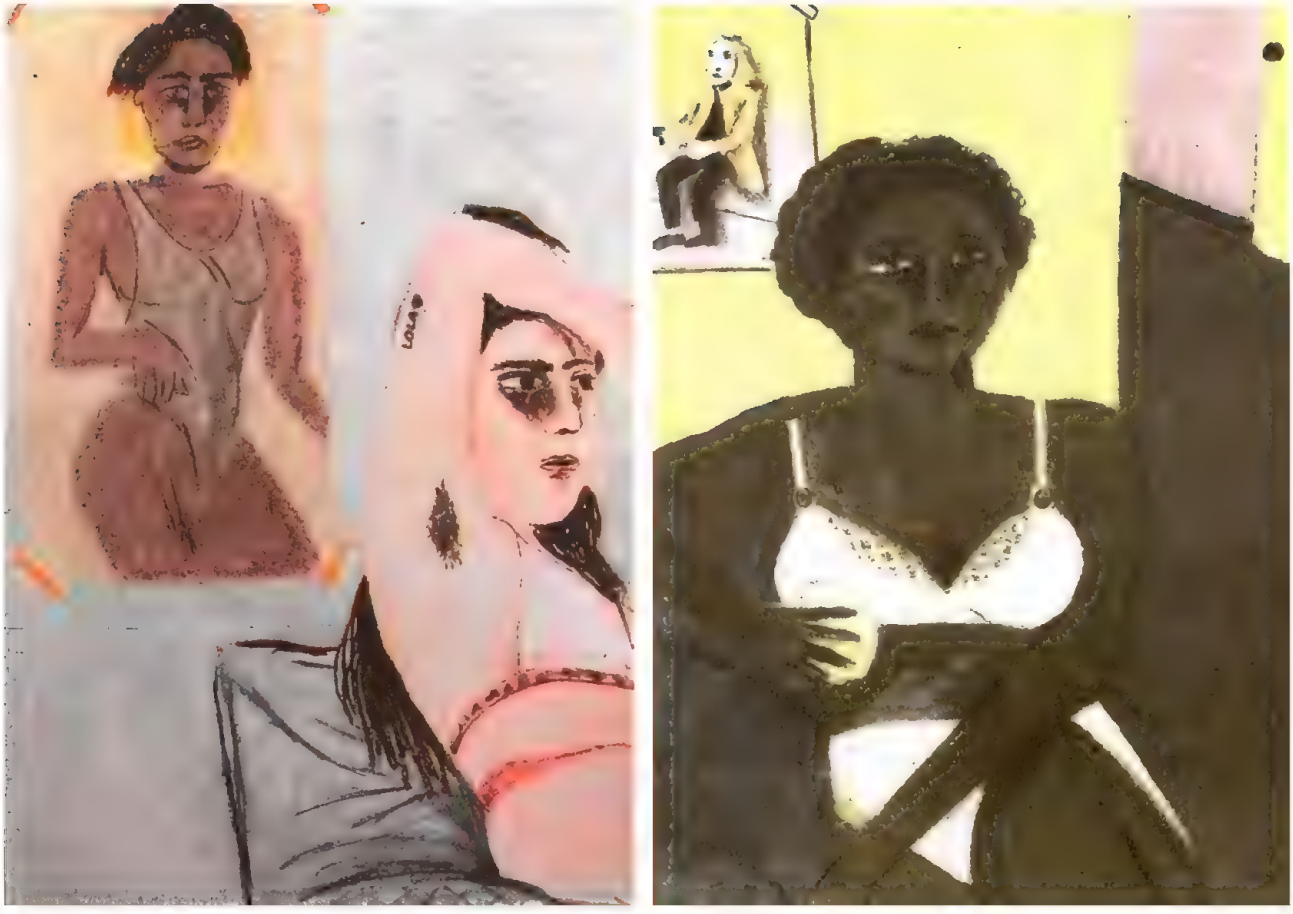

Fig. 5: Intersectional frames. Portraits from *Waiting*, p. [37], p. [45].

Playboy magazine cover explored earlier (see Figure 2), which targeted instead a masculine audience. In this manner, *Waiting* presents an intersectional take on feminist politics that is dissonant with the univocal ideal of femininity popularised by Western media during the 90s.

Sadness as Public Feeling

A further aesthetic expression used by Lozano to make an appraisal out of her representation of the wait is by making her protagonists look sad. At first glance, this may show how fed up the protagonists are of the idealised versions of femininity they are meant to inhabit. But their sadness seems to be more complex. Feminist scholar and affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich makes a case for the ways in which depression manifests in the public sphere in her book *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Cvetkovich reads depression as the discourse built around subjects that do not conform with the normative regulations of the good life. In her account, anyone who cannot keep up with the speed of capitalist culture is medicalised and therefore read as depressed (Cvetkovich, 12). This is one way in which the wait can be read in the comic, in the direction of »what gets called depression in the domestic sphere [...] one that often keeps people silent, weary, and too numb to really notice the sources of their unhappiness (or in a state of low-level chronic grief – or depression of another kind – if they do)« (12).

But as we have seen, even if Lozano does frame her characters within this narrative, she also presents us with bodies that challenge it. Just like the uncanny affective atmosphere that manifests spatially, we might begin reading an accumulated sadness as revelatory of something else, especially taking into account that here sadness is being shown publicly. Sadness is being exposed through a similar massive outlet to that used by the media discourses at the time, for instance via the 90s magazine. The comic, in this sense, highlights the relevance of »finding public forums for everyday feelings, including negative feelings that can seem [...] debilitating« (Cvetkovich, 2). As Ahmed notes, »we might want to reread melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good« (Ahmed, 50).

Lozano's characters embody what Ahmed calls the *feminist killjoy*: those whose experiences threaten the ›good life's‹ fictions. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed examines the figure of the killjoy alongside other characters whose mere existences defy the hegemonic: the unhappy queer, the angry black woman and the melancholic migrant. Amongst them, the killjoy are they who always ruin the mood of the party, so to speak, by killing joy with their feminist interventions, for instance by pointing out at the conventional family table that what someone just said is racist or sexist. If in Ahmed's oft-cited table example one sees how the killjoy intervenes verbally, in Waiting, the killjoy affect rather manifests graphically.

Fig. 6: An unstable model of personhood. Portrait from *Waiting*, p. [33].

For example, the portrait on page [33], as shown in Figure 6, shows a half-naked woman standing next to a table with a chandelier and a plate on top. She holds a glass of wine, which she is about to spill. She looks downhearted. It seems ambivalent that despite living within these bourgeois settings, happiness is not following. For all that we see »the promise of the feeling« in the objects that surround her, the actual feeling lags behind (Ahmed, 27). Here, it is the depiction of the body as off-the-norm (sad, semi-naked) that contrasts with what could be a woman at ease within a leisure space, and which irradiates to the contrary a feeling of overwhelming anxiety. Graphically, this manifests as a shape that takes over: the shape of the glass of wine the woman is holding is replicated in her body, in the form made between her vulva and the gap between her thighs, and it is also echoed upside down by the shape of her brassiere. It then comes up again in the three images hung in the wall. The presence of the body at the centre destabilises the drawing's atmosphere: it seems to have been caught off guard. This produces a radically different effect to what the authors of *Woman's World* point out about the women's magazine during the 90s; they write: »the magazines' representations of femininity are offered in a form which is, above all, easy to deal with, process, interpret« (Ballaster/Beetham/Frazer/Hebron, 132). Here, we get the opposite. The character evokes an unstable model of personhood that is difficult to identify with precisely because it leans onto an affective atmosphere of uncanniness and indeterminacy. As such, it challenges the »very specific model of subjectivity« on which the good life relies, »where one knows how one feels, and where the distinction between good and bad feeling is secure« (Ahmed, 6).

While the above example uses the figure of the sad killjoy to destabilise a hegemonic model of subjectivity, there are other ways in which Lozano points to the representation of sadness as a public and political feeling. An example can be found in Figure 7, which portrays a woman reading a book titled »the sexually free housewife« (Lozano, p. [14]). She is in

her underwear, with her legs open and having a drink. In this drawing, the title of the book gestures explicitly to the liberation of the housewife within a patriarchal society. This object is especially key, for it offers a way to reread sadness in the rest of the portraits, wherein women are pictured within domestic spaces, and in which most of the feminine characters are not shown doing house chores, as it has already been noted, but instead, reading, resting and drinking.

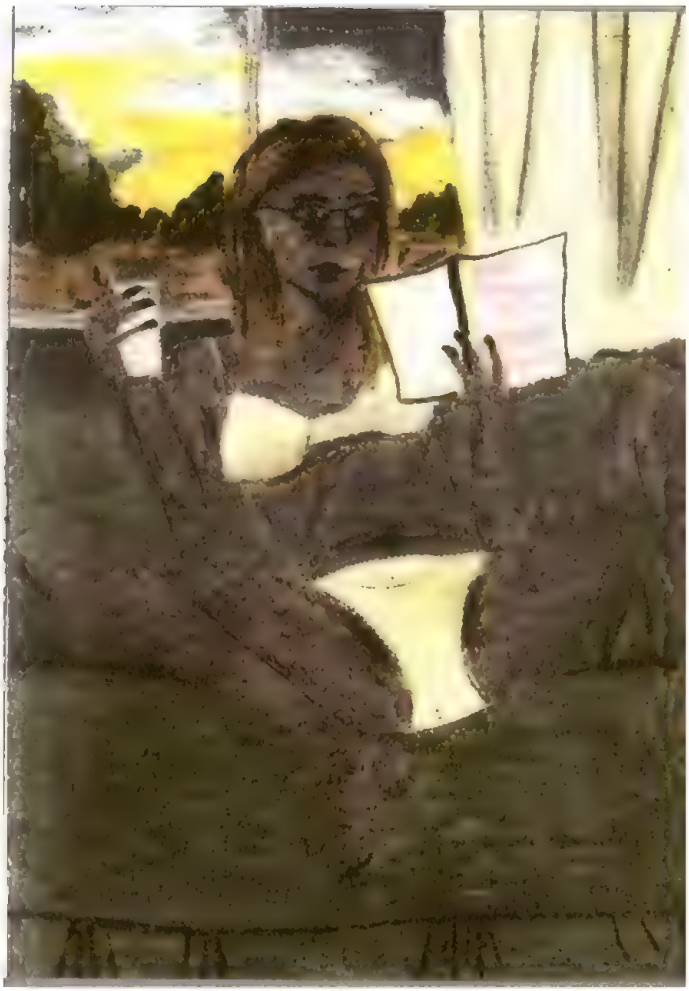

Fig. 7: The sexually free housewife. Portrait from *Waiting*, p. [14].

The book in this character's hands directs us away from the association of leisure with an uncritical happiness and moves us closer towards the reclaiming of housework as a feminist struggle. This object, to borrow Henry Jenkins' terms from his monograph *Comics and Stuff*, is »not drawn by accident« (Jenkins, 17). Its inclusion adds nuance to the domestic settings featured in the comic. As Silvia Federici said in her 1975 seminal essay *Wages against Housework*, it is within these spaces, that »our faces have become distorted from so much smiling, our feelings have got lost from so much loving, our oversexualization has left us completely desexualized« (Federici, 19). The book is on display to make the character into a feminist killjoy, who, on the one hand, reclaims leisure time as political work, and, on the other, criticises the hegemonic wait characteristic of the housewife lifestyle for its adherence to an unproblematised happiness narrative.

There is, however, an important issue that as readers we must address, especially considering the privileged surroundings in which these women are depicted. What other domestic labour might be concealed here? Shown drinking coffee, smoking, reading or just leaning, the women in *Waiting* seem to be bodies effortlessly ›housed‹ by the world. By this, I point to the material structures ›housing‹ their subjectivities, which here seem to be constituted by bourgeois attachments and desires. The recognition of their sadness, in this context, is especially key, for as Ahmed reminds us, it can be »hard labor to recognise sadness and disap-

pointment when you are living a life that is meant to be happy but just isn't, which is meant to be full, but feels empty« (Ahmed, 75). Even so, this same freedom to be feminist killjoys might be hiding, to borrow Ahmed's words, »labor of other women, who might be required to take over the foaming dishpans« (Ahmed, 51). Read in this way, their sadness might be the start for a recognition that the liberation of some could also mean the oppression of others.

The Wandering Reader

Up to this point, this essay has proposed that the spatialisation of the wait as an affective atmosphere 1) challenges the promises, expectations, and bodies set by the ›good life‹ and 2) uses sadness as a public feeling to present an alternative model of subjectivity. There remains a key question to ask here: how does the reader fit into *Waiting*'s aesthetic expression of the wait?

Lozano's comic encourages the reader to adopt a wandering gaze that is similar to that associated with the practice of waiting. First, the repetition of objects, scattered across the portraits, is one way in which the comic invites us to implement such gaze. For example, one can take a look at the roses that decorate the ashtray shown in Figure 1. These can then be spotted accompanying many of the characters featured in the book: as part of the artworks decorating their interior spaces, as a pattern in their clothes, tattooed on many of their bodies, et cetera.

The effect of this iconographic braiding is a reading practice that plays with the characteristics of the act of waiting itself. Schweizer's annotations on how the waiter lets their gaze wander around aimlessly is useful to illuminate this point. In his treaty on the matter, the author draws on Walter Benjamin to make an analogy between the waiter's gaze and the eye of the camera. He affirms that »like the camera, the waiter's eye performs what Benjamin describes as ›lowerings and liftings … interruptions and isolations … extensions and accelerations … enlargements and reductions‹ – except that, unlike the camera, the waiter's gaze performs these functions compulsively, without a plan of action« (Schweizer, 31). Taking the gaze from one object to another, the waiter is able to mask the tedious passing of time: »the magazines in waiting rooms, the entertainment on television, the computer games, the snacks, the cigarettes« (Schweizer, 8). Objects are meant to fill the wait, to help the waiter cope with inactivity.

The waiter's gaze, as described by Schweizer, can be compared with what Jenkins, drawing on comics scholar Thierry Smolderen, calls an *unmoored reader*, one who scans in multiple directions the comics page and performs a dispersed mode of interpretation (Jenkins, 40). It has been said as well by many comics theorists: we read comics in a constellative way, making connections between elements that might be at different ends of the narrative, rarely in a

linear manner. Comics scholar Thierry Groensteen, for instance, named the associative system by which comics work with the term »general arthrology«, foregrounding how comics are built through nonlinear relations »that are not simultaneously offered to the gaze« (39). Nick Sousanis makes a similar argument, suggesting that, as readers, we approach the comic page »fixing on a target before dashing off to seek another of interest«, so »our vision captures disconnected static snapshots, an incomplete picture riddled with gaps« (Sousanis, 90).

By using objects that repeat themselves throughout different scenes and that tempt the reader to move and make connections, Lozano makes this particularity of the medium explicit. *Waiting*'s reader therefore assumes the jumping gaze that Schweizer associates with the waiter. Notably, this has the effect of including the reader in the characters' universe, making it part of their contradictory wait. In turn, it makes us consider *the (sad) wait* in its collective dimensions, not as a single action, but rather as a further step towards the recognition of the ›good life's‹ broken promises and the importance of positing sadness as a public feeling.

Reclining Bodies

Even if mobile objects, in Lozano's account, seem to be encouraging »issues of vicariousness, or of choreography« (Wilson, 5), especially in the unmoored reader, it is also through stillness that the comic frames the wait as revolutionary. Most, if not all, of the women in *Waiting* are pictured in reclining poses. Some seem to be resting, sitting down; others are just slightly leaning on something; some of them are naked; and just a few take a vertical upright position (see, for example, Figure 1, Figure 5 and Figure 7). I am drawn to their reclining postures, just like I am drawn to their sadness, for its collective manifestation. First, because rest, conceived in its public dimension, just like sadness, can be radical. The reclining posture can point to the same exhaustion remarked on earlier in reference to their sadness: to say these women recline because they want to is valid, yet to say that these women need to do so speaks, to borrow Lauren Berlant's words, about the »conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world« as scenes where subjects are »worn out« (Berlant, 23). The importance of interpreting the resting wait as a product of sadness and to read their reclined bodies as exhaustion, here, unmasks the narrative of depression attributed to the percentage of the population that cannot keep up with the speed of »corporate culture and the market economy« (Cvetkovich, 12), and suggests that it might be the other way round. Here, rest, portrayed as a collective issue, performs a refusal to such temporality of progression and challenges the medicalisation of bodies that lie outside the norm. In its reclining poses, Lozano, to put it in Cvetkovich wise words, »explore[s] the feeling of remaining or resting in sadness without insisting that it be transformed or reconceived« (Cvetkovich, 14).

While this reading is crucial, the resting posture can also be interpreted otherwise. One can engage with the reclining body as an invitation to reconsider subjectivity within a larger web of relationality. Emma Wilson, in her book *The Reclining Nude*, examines contemporary visual media created by three women (Agnes Varda, Catherine Breillat and Nan Goldin) that picture other women »reclining«. She uses this concept making a wink to the classical nude portrait of a woman laying down, under the gaze, most commonly, of a male painter, yet she stretches »its meanings outwards, referring to all manner of situations of horizontality« (Wilson, 4). To do so, Wilson draws on Italian feminist thinker Adriana Cavarero and her theorisations on relationality in *Relating Narratives*, and on queer theorist Judith Butler's ideas in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Expanding on both, she proposes that the reclining nude of a woman painted by another is an example of the »narrative scene« that takes place between women when either of them is looking to give an account of themselves. Cavarero's »narrative scene«, as understood by Wilson, refers to opening the stories we tell about ourselves to the tales others might have about us (Wilson, 4). Likewise, reclining, stretching outwards, for Wilson, implies recognising that the relational scene is always one of vulnerable exposure to the other.

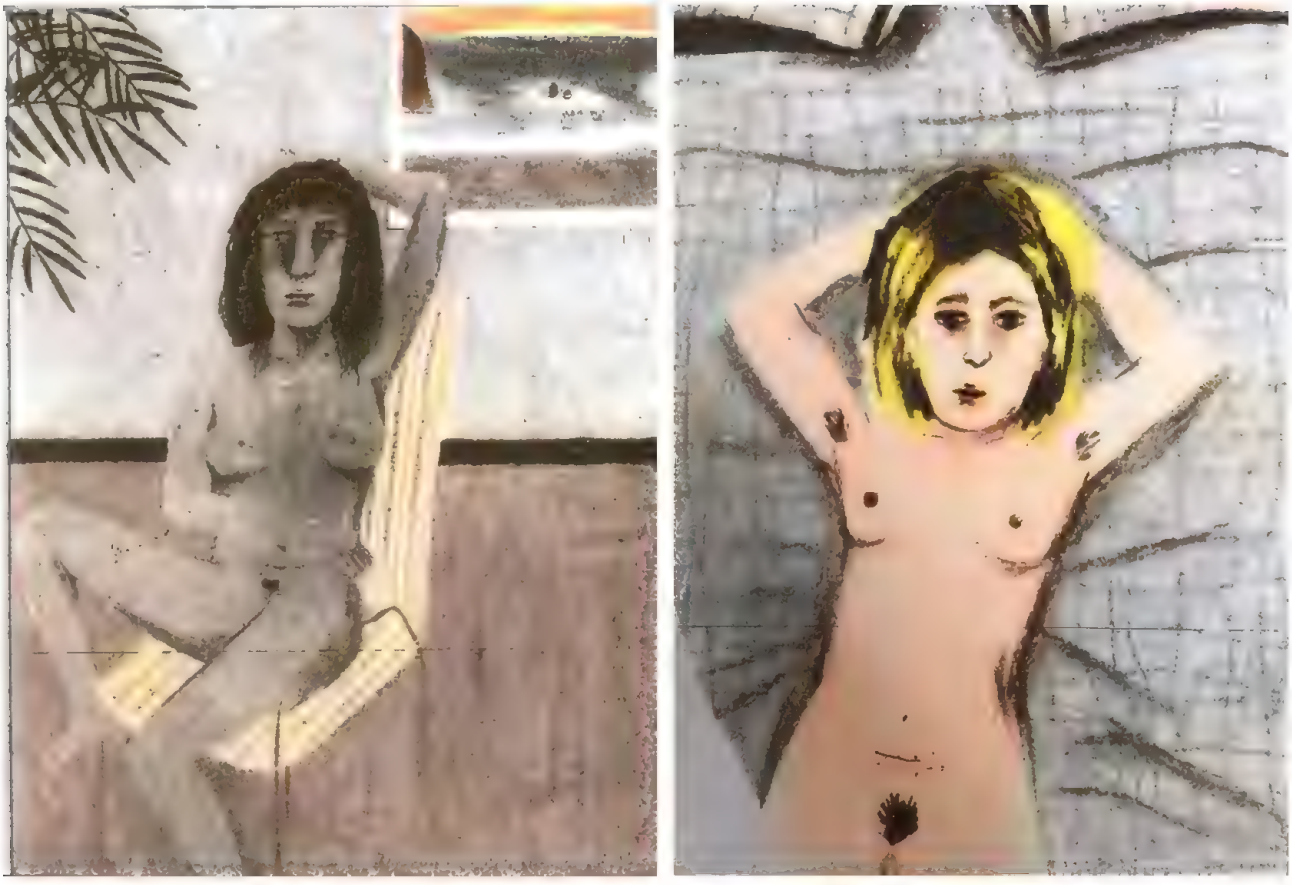

Fig. 8: Lozano's reclining nudes. Portraits from *Waiting*, p.[27], p.[41].

Wilson's interpretation is relevant to my reading of *Waiting* because Lozano, as mentioned, includes several portraits of women in positions of rest, and, amongst those, some reclining nudes, as shown in Figure 8. Following Wilson, one can observe how Lozano, by including these portraits in her collection, not only underlines the »alterity, respect for remoteness, and unknowing that the figure can conjure« (Wilson, 9), but she also prompts us to ask further questions: What changes when one represents a body reclining? What other ways of relating might be hinted at when we challenge verticality? These two questions speak about an alternative approach to the scene wherein women exist amongst each other. Reinforcing what I argued earlier, they challenge the idea that women rest because they share the same unhappiness caused by their inability to keep up; instead, they encourage us to read rest as a spatial, relational and embodied mode of thinking about women's agency.

Many years after *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero published *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*. Therein, still reflecting on this same relational vulnerability, she echoes Hannah Arendt's belief that »every inclination turns outward« to point out the liminal boundaries between self and world. For Arendt, the self opens onto the world, taking from it whatever affects them. Drawing on this reading, Cavarero defines an ›inclination‹ as that which reveals a »geometrical imaginary« that challenges the vertical, straight posture the ›I‹ has held historically in philosophical thought; inclinations »bend and dispossess« the self (Cavarero 2016, 5). She uses the example of maternal inclination as epitome, where the mother, conventionally thought only in terms of care, can be instead pictured as inclining in both directions, within a spectrum »between care and wound«. But she makes clear that the same happens with many of the »way[s] [in which] the feminine character is dramatised« (Cavarero 2016, 105). Historically, women have been fixed within certain symbolic roles, their idealised figures not admitting the possibilities of leaning on the other, and, in doing so, moving sideways, fidgeting, refusing.[2]

Perhaps most importantly, to read Lozano's reclining nudes in this manner becomes a way of contesting other ways in which the media has thought about women's nakedness.

Art critic John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, his famous BBC television series and then book of the same name, takes the nude as subject for some of his reflections. Berger elaborates and criticises how along history the idea of a woman's nude has been the epitome of women being seen as objects by the male gaze. Consequently, he writes that »[for women] to be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised [...]. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude« (54). Countering this take on the nude, when we read Lozano's pictures via Wilson and Cavarero, the nakedness of their characters can indeed be read as nudes, without them being positioned as objects for the male gaze. Lozano's nudes, instead, recognise the subjects' presence and convey a relational form of embodiment in which women lean onto one another.

A further key aspect that reinforces this idea is illustrated by the characters' shared tattoos, especially one many of them carry of the name LOLA, as displayed in Figure 9 (see also Figure 5). Even if we ignore each of their individual stories, or even who LOLA might be, Lozano creates a web of embodied alliance that unites them through these common inscriptions (Figure 9). Their tattoos, some hidden, some exposed, some imagined, emphasise the immeasurable nature of their intersubjectivity and are there to be braided together by the reader's unmoored gaze. The tattoos are marks on the body that speak of the latter as one to be rewritten. As such, they foreground that, just like Wilson puts it drawing on Butler, »there is no full narrative, either of oneself or of an other, and this is precisely because the self is exposed to others, open to others, formed by others, in ways that remain unfathomable« (Wilson, 30).

The fact that the comic was riso printed adds another dimension to this last point. The technique of risography is very common amongst independent publishers, like Amsterdam's *Terry Bleu*; it is also a cheaper and more ecological way for artists to print their work. As an unpredictable process, risography often produces small mistakes in the printing and the final product has a handmade texture and feeling. The result is a surface where layers do not always line up, a charac-

Fig. 9: The *LOLA* tattoo. Portraits from *Waiting*, p.[5], p.[22].

teristic that brings forward the technique's DIY aesthetics. *Waiting* is riso printed using a 3-colour palette, although the tones achieve varying intensities and brightness according to how they have been layered. If one looks closely (see Figure 9, for example), one can see the lines left by the printing process. Like Lozano's unhappy archive itself, risography is a technique made of overlapping tones. Mirroring how riso printing is an embodied procedure that works with layering, the version of subjectivity encouraged by *Waiting* is one which displays the self's intersubjective, multiple and bodily composition.

Fig. 10: Flowers as centre piece. *Waiting*, p. [48].

Waiting's last portrait, as seen in Figure 10, mimicking the opening one, does not show a body as centre piece, but a vase with flowers instead. A pair of hands holding a cutter is reaching towards the vase, about to *cut-out* a branch. The background cover that follows, shown in Figure 11, depicts a closed hand, featuring the LOLA tattoo on the wrist's inside. I want to think of this hand as the hand cutting out the branch in the last portrait, and of this cut-out flower as one of the objects that connects the bodies collected here. This closing scene, like the technique of riso itself, visualises the process in the finished product. As such, it argues for the power of collectively cutting up and rewriting the oppressive temporalities of capitalism, amongst which ›to wait‹ for the ›good life‹ is a key one. What these women rewrite is the idea of the wait, and, in doing so, they undermine the power of the ›good life's‹ promises. Lozano's women are sad because they refuse to assemble over a fake happiness. But it is, perhaps, in this sadness, where they might find the origins of their resistance.

Conclusions

Along my meditations on Adriana Lozano's *Waiting*, I have followed the aesthetic forms taken by the lingering wait, paying close attention to the ways in which the characters pictured attune to the spaces and relations that surround them. I have asked about the spatial

dimensions of the wait, arguing that the comics form is one way to make expressive the ambivalent narratives and looming desires of its inner workings. As Nick Sousanis reminds us, comics, because they are flat and static, can hold together the ›unflat‹: the simultaneous and the non-simultaneous, the linear and the non-linear. In Lozano's *Waiting*, wherein the scenes produce an uncanny affective atmosphere as we turn the pages, the progression of temporality seems to be paused, while space keeps stretching out, connecting the individual scenes through other means: the objects, the postures, the tattoos they share.

Fig. 11: An embodied alliance. *Waiting*'s back cover.

To summarise, I have proposed that Lozano's *Waiting* represents the temporality of the wait as that which bears the attachments to the ›good life‹. To do so, the comic uses a pastiche representation of the 90s women's magazine in the western hemisphere and proposes that these frames are instead inhabited by non-normative and rather unhappy bodies. Lozano's characters foreground that while happiness is conventionally equated with certain ways of being and living, the actual possession of the latter does not necessarily guarantee that one will indeed be *happy*, but rather that one gets trapped in an endless and tedious wait. The representation of sadness as a collective issue highlights this last point and at the same time invites the reader to read the wait in another, more revolutionary direction. By including several nudes and reclining portraits in her series, Lozano also encourages us to read the wait for its revolutionary potential and invites us to interpret rest as an intersubjective and embodied mode of thinking about women's agency.

All things considered, it remains to be said that *Waiting* is especially significant for it can be placed amongst a larger archive of women comics artists that use the collection of portraits as an aesthetic tool that pictures identity as spatial and relational. This is the case, for example, of Lynda Barry's *Naked Ladies!*, a set of postcards featuring women from different backgrounds, and Vanessa Davis' *Make Me a Woman*. Closer to home, in Latin America, we can mention *Chicks I Know* (2017) by Powerpaola (Colombia/Ecuador), in which the artist assembles 48 portraits of her women friends holding a dialogue on art and culture; *Tengo*

unas flores con tu nombre (2018) by Jazmín Varela (Argentina), 20 portraits of women in their everyday lives speaking words of sorority; and *Retratarlas* (2020) by Jimena Salinas (Perú), another series of portraits that intertwines illustrations with written fragments on this generation's frustrations, worries and struggles. In all these works, while one portrait might already give hints of its constitutive archive, it is when we focus our attention on the frames as they come together that their aesthetic and political force becomes more powerful.

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Fig. 10: Lozano Román, Adriana: Waiting. Amsterdam: Terry Bleu, 2018, p. [48].

Fig. 11: Lozano Román, Adriana: Waiting. Amsterdam: Terry Bleu, 2018, back cover.

1] On this topic, as stated by Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak in their edited collection *Ethnographies of Waiting*, these are some important works on the social practice of waiting: Craig Jeffrey's anthropological study *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India* (2010), Javier Auyero's sociological account *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina* (2012), and Ghassan Hage's interdisciplinary edited volume *Waiting* (2009) (Janeja and Bandak, 4).

2] The concept of ›moving sideways‹ is inspired by Kathryn Bond Stockton's ideas on the queer child. See Bond Stockton, Kathryn: The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

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Beyond the Chronotope

De-Narrativization in Graphic Trauma Narratives (1980–2018)

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Narratives are often reliant, if not contingent, upon sequentiality, as suggested by etymologies that associate the act of narrating (English *to recount*, French *raconter*, German *erzählen*) with counting (English *to count*, French *conter*, German *zählen*) (etymonline). A wide range of artistic genres such as literature, film, music and dance operate with strings of sounds, syllables, letters or movements that echo numerical lists. Plotlines, cinematographic shots, musical scores and choreographies utilize signifiers whose sequentiality – however fractured or complex – defines narrative strands and lends them meaning (Grabes). By way of contrast, visual genres such as paintings, photographs and sculptures evoke narratives paradigmatically, through a strategic positioning of select signifiers (such as characters or visual symbols) within a given frame, prompting viewers to decode these narratively by constructing storylines around them (Porter Abbot, 6–12).

These two contrasting modes of signification – syntagmatic and paradigmatic – are central to storytelling in comics and graphic novels, where artists may *construct* narratives sequentially, through the gutter (McCloud), or *elicit* them paradigmatically, through an effective *mise-en-page* (Cohn). This second, paradigmatic modality, which is often sidelined in discussions of narrativity in ›sequential art‹, prominently comes to the fore when comic artists suspend sequential narration and signify through iconic panels (such as the swastika crossroads in *Maus* (Spiegelman 2011b, 125)), mesmerizing splashes (in *Watchmen*), reconfigured waffle grids (in Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*) or time-lapsed static frames (in Richard McGuire's *Here*). Artists typically deploy these techniques to accentuate key moments within a given narrative – notably openings, endings or climaxes – lending them poignancy and weight.

Paradigmatic signification is also central to comics which aspire to non-narrativity, such as the experimental and abstract comics promoted by Andrei Molotiu and Thierry Groensteen (Groensteen, 9-16), where core narrative elements like characters, settings and

captions have been erased, and signification is sustained through abstract shapes and the formal apparatus alone. In Derik Badman's *Flying Chief* (discussed in Groensteen 15, cf. Fig. 1), the author's redrawing of backgrounds from a *Tarzan* comic, coupled with the erasing of protagonists, props, scenery and captions, results in a severing of plotlines, an eroding of character arcs, and a blurring of the spatial and temporal dimensions that govern the original, unmodified »geno-text« (Johnson, 74). As a result, Badman's version weakens syntactic ties between the panels and augments their entropy (or degree of interchangeability within a given sequence). Badman [89] thereby opens up the page to multiple sequential readings: left-to-right, top-to-bottom (like in the geno-text), right-to-left, bottom-to-top (in reverse order), as vertical columns, as horizontal tiers, as a circular text (clockwise or anticlockwise) or in random order. Removing narrative elements, then, fundamentally shapes the structure and modality of a text; if *Flying Chief* is to be taken as a guide, erasure limits or eliminates sequential signification through the gutter while strengthening a text's paradigmatic axis.

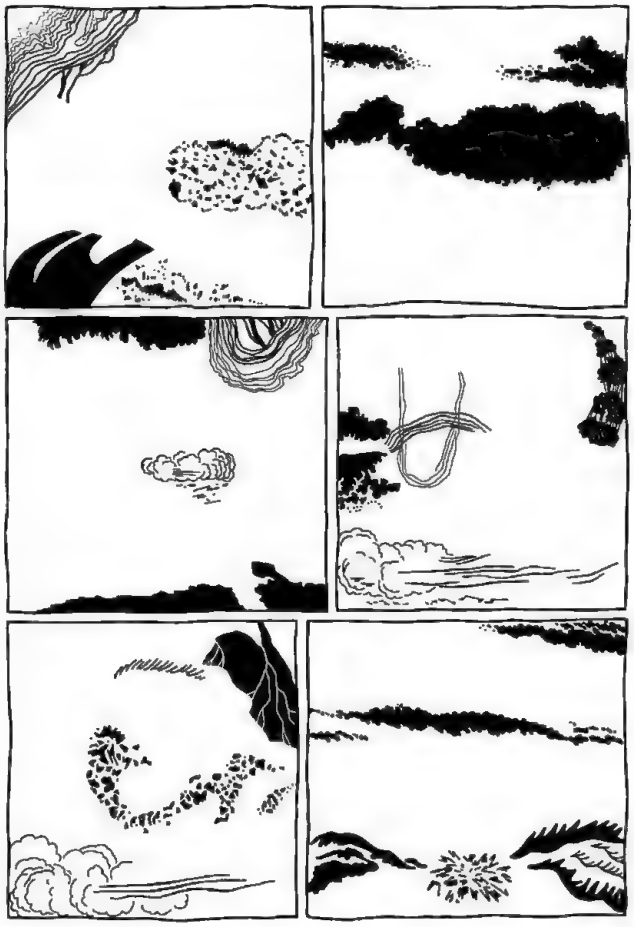

Fig. 1: Derik Badman. *Flying Chief.*

A similar superseding of syntagms through non-sequential paradigms can be observed in trauma narratives, where the »slippery, elusive, spectral« nature of traumatic memories renders them largely »unrepresentable« (Davies, 1), giving rise to fragmented, impressionistic, »modernist or anti-realist« texts (Davies, 8). While this »culturally dominant« form of trauma (Davies, 8) represents a stereotype that requires further qualification, there is evidence to suggest that comic artists working on trauma often wrestle with similar challenges of unrepresentability, and adopt shared strategies to meet them. One such strategy consists of a semiotic code-switching from conventional, plot-driven, sequential narration to a looser, paradigmatic discourse that stalls narrative strands and captures the ineffability of trauma through narrative stasis. While similar kinds of fragmentation can be observed in purely sequential genres (such as war poetry), comics – by virtue of their multimediality – can

leverage a wider range of techniques to pause narration and articulate the inaccessibility of traumatic memory. It is specifically the ways in which comics may decouple an illustrated page from sequentiality altogether which distinguish the genre from other art forms.

Instances of such code-switching, which I shall call *de-narrativization* (to emphasize the way it minimizes rather than fully eclipses narrativity), can be found in many texts that explore »historical« and »structural trauma« (Bond/Craps, 79–83). *Maus*, an ur-text of comics and trauma theory (Davies, 3–5, Bond/Craps, 83–86), offers an ideal starting point for defining and exploring such practice. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986) serves as a useful follow-up to demonstrate the application of such techniques in superhero comics, a genre that teems with traumatized protagonists. Vignettes from *Persepolis* (Iran/France, 2000), *Daytripper* (Brazil, 2010) and *If Einstein is right …* (UK, 2018) illustrate the prevalence of the practice, and the ways in which cultural, historical and biographical contexts feed into, and shape, de-narrativization. Collectively, the case studies discussed below underline the innovative potential of code-switches, and the ways in which de-narrativization often goes hand in hand with a creative reconfiguration of the formal apparatus.

Overall, de-narrativization emerges as an effective tool that allows artists to disengage from narration while sustaining a compelling visual discourse, thereby mimetically articulating the lacunae that characterize traumatic memory. Used thoughtfully, de-narrativization strengthens graphic trauma narratives by giving voice to the »inexpressible nature of trauma« (Adorno qtd. in Bond/Craps, 48), thereby highlighting comics' ability to articulate complex emotional experiences through a clever redeploying of select visual and verbal components.

Maus

De-narrativization is prominently used in *Maus* (1980–91) to capture the second-generation traumatization the auteur-narrator experiences through the act of relaying his father Vladek's memories of the Holocaust. The narrative stasis evoked in various de-narrativized vignettes attains shock value through the contrast it provides to the dense interweaving of narrative strands in the rest of the novel, where Vladek's testimony intersects with the frame narrative of Art interviewing Vladek, and with shorter embedded stories such as the *Prisoner of the Hell Planet* sequence. The narrator disrupts this multilayered narration through stills that express his difficulties of relaying Vladek's narrative. The poignancy of these moments underscores the close relationship between giving voice to trauma and narrative innovation: as an elusive, spectral memory, trauma defies linear narration, and necessitates new forms of expression beyond Bakhtinian »chronotopes« – the »time spaces« that define self-contained, coherent story universes (Bakhtin 1981, 84).

A prime example where Spiegelman stalls, or ›de-narrativizes‹, storytelling occurs in the opening page of *Time Flies* (Fig. 2), a prologue to the main Auschwitz chapter in *Maus II*, where the narrator offers a surreal portrait of himself working in his studio as he gradually succumbs to an oppressive sense of guilt in the face of his parents' and other survivors' sufferings. In what constitutes the first major authorial disruption of the dominant plotlines, Spiegelman draws four close-ups of a mouse-masked alter ego working at his desk, followed by a massive panel revealing a pile of lifeless mice-humans lying underneath. The disturbing intensity of these frames, coupled with packed speech bubbles that slow down the reading, give the reader pause. The deceleration is intensified through interpretive challenges which are partly iconographic (as readers need time to identify the oversized, fragmented Swastika behind Art, or the watchtower to his right) but even more so semiotic, as it is unclear how the dismantling of narrative conventions (such as the reducing of ›mousiness‹ to a mask, or the overlapping of various spatialities and temporalities) is to be read.

Time flies...
Vladek died of congestive heart failure on August 18, 1982...
Françoise and I stayed with him in the Catskills back in August 1979.
Vladek started working as a tinman in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944...
I started working on this page at the very end of February 1987.
In May 1987 Françoise and I are expecting a baby...
Between May 16, 1944 and May 24, 1944 over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz...
In September 1986, after 8 years of work, the first part of MAUS was published. It was a critical and commercial success.
At least fifteen foreign editions are coming out. I've gotten 4 serious offers to turn my book into a T.V. special or movie. (I don't wanna.)
In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.)
Lately I've been feeling depressed.
Alright Mr. Spiegelman... We're ready to shoot!...

Fig. 2: Opening page of *Time Flies*, introducing the Auschwitz chapter in *Maus II* (Spiegelman 2011b, 201).

The page also marks a transition from narration to commentary or discourse. While the page is undoubtedly narrative in that it establishes a new storyline chronicling the making of *Maus*, it likewise pauses dominant plotlines and offers meta-commentary rather than furthering the story arcs, as Spiegelman confirms: »I think of *Time Flies* as a *Meta-Maus*-like commentary on the whole project. It sits on top of *Maus* the way my character in a mask sits on top of all those bodies« (2011a, 165). The page's commentary-like feel also arises from Spiegelman's fragmenting of firmly-established chronotopes. Rather than

exploring a single spatial setting (such as Reno Park in the 50s or war-torn Poland), the page blends glimpses of an art studio, a watchtower, a propaganda mural, a gas chamber and a film studio in one single panel.

This montage is complemented by a fragmenting of temporalities whereby divergent chronologies move in opposite directions. The first four panels of Art working at his desk pitch a future-oriented timeline tracing Art's and Françoise's artistic success and family life (»[we] stayed with him [...] in 1979« / »I started working on this page [in] February 1987« / »In May 1987 [we] are expecting a baby« / »At least fifteen foreign editions are coming out«) against a regressive timeline chronicling Vladek's and other Holocaust victims' sufferings: »[He] died of heart disease« / »[He] started working as a tinman« / »Between May 16, 1944 and May 24, 1944 over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed.« This curious juxtaposition is couched in a vaguely-defined »new layer of time«, a »new present tense« showing the artist in the process of creating the text (Spiegelman 2011a, 147), which feels static and inert. Art's oscillating monologue bumbles on until it culminates in a trauma-laden »In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.) / Lately, I've been feeling depressed«, thus effectively draining the page of narrative momentum. Given the scope of the following pages (detailing Vladek's suffering at Auschwitz), such narrative stasis becomes perfectly understandable: reluctant to engage with the horrors of Auschwitz, the narrator chooses digression over narration, and uses delaying tactics in order to avoid having to face Vladek's traumatic memories, which he now relives vicariously through his act of narration.

As he explains in *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman struggled immensely with completing this particular Auschwitz chapter: »[T]he success of the first book [*Maus I*] [...] led me toward a kind of breakdown. I didn't know how to proceed through the gates of Auschwitz [...] It was only after my long sessions with Pavel [Spiegelman's therapist] that I was able to distill the sessions down to a few pages and basically start again« (2011a, 145–46). These »few pages«, which start with the reproduced page (Fig. 2) and stretch over another five pages (Spiegelman 2011b, 202–06), become increasingly plot-driven as Spiegelman's mouse-masked avatar leaves the studio and visits his therapist Pavel, engaging in a lengthy dialogue that explores his sense of guilt. By way of contrast, the opening of *Time Flies* appears far more static in the original draft (Fig. 3), where the excerpted page (Fig. 2) is preceded by another page showing nothing but giant flies moving across a white surface or air, accompanied by the motto »Time Flies« spoken by an unidentified narrator, and delivered by a mouse-masked narrator in a revised version (Fig. 4). Dramatizing how »time moves through panels« through the extensive metaphor of »flies in space or flies in time« (2011a, 165), both drafts decelerate time experientially (slowing down reading time), textually (blurring iconographic indicators of time) and contextually (referencing the long gestation period of *Maus I*, and the premature death of Vladek).[1] Such de-celeration also de-narrativizes the page, since the eight-panel grid morphs from being a syntactic sequence to becoming a single paradigmatic space in

which the gutter – the syntactic narrative core – has been de-activated. This canceling out of the gutter is playfully acknowledged in both versions (Fig. 3–4) through a fly crossing the central gutter in an upward movement, thus again challenging the left-to-right, top-to-bottom directionality of the text.

Such paradigmatic stasis also connotes a loss of direction and sense of purpose while moving forward – or sustaining narrative momentum – with the process of coming to terms with traumatic memory. Spiegelman's de-narrativization dramatizes the narrator's struggle to overcome his paralysis, with his stalling signaling an uncontrollable ›acting-out‹, or compulsive reimagining, of traumatic memory, whereas the resumption of sequential narration conveys an attempt to ›work through‹, or narratively process, trauma (Bond/Craps, 78–79). Spiegelman's code-switching between narrative (syntactic) and discursive (paradigmatic) modalities thus effectively articulates an inner struggle rooted in intergenerational traumatization.

The alternation between narrative and discursive modes in *Time Flies* also illustrates how closely working-through and acting-out are linked. Trauma theorists contend that a successful working-through inevitably incorporates some acting-out on behalf of the

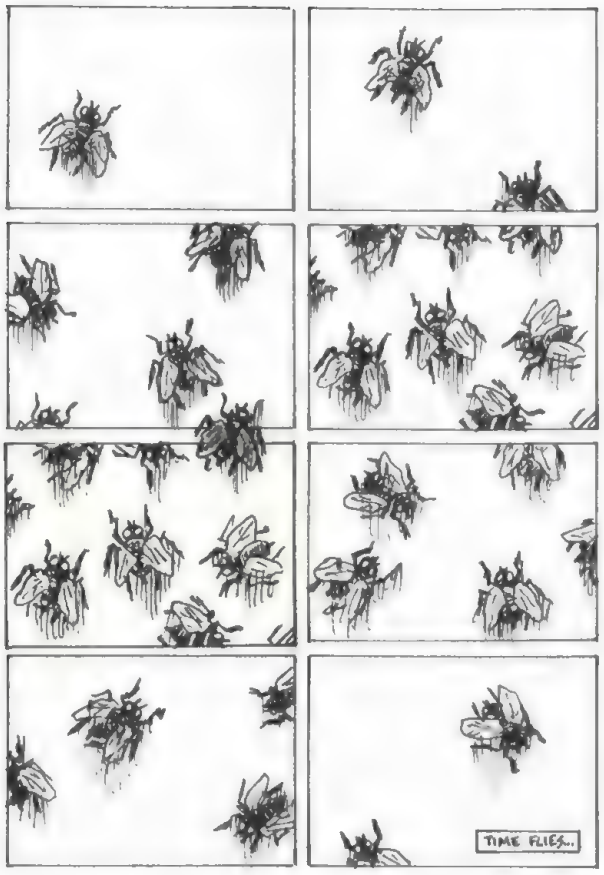

Fig. 3: First draft of *Time Flies* (Spiegelman 2011a, 160).

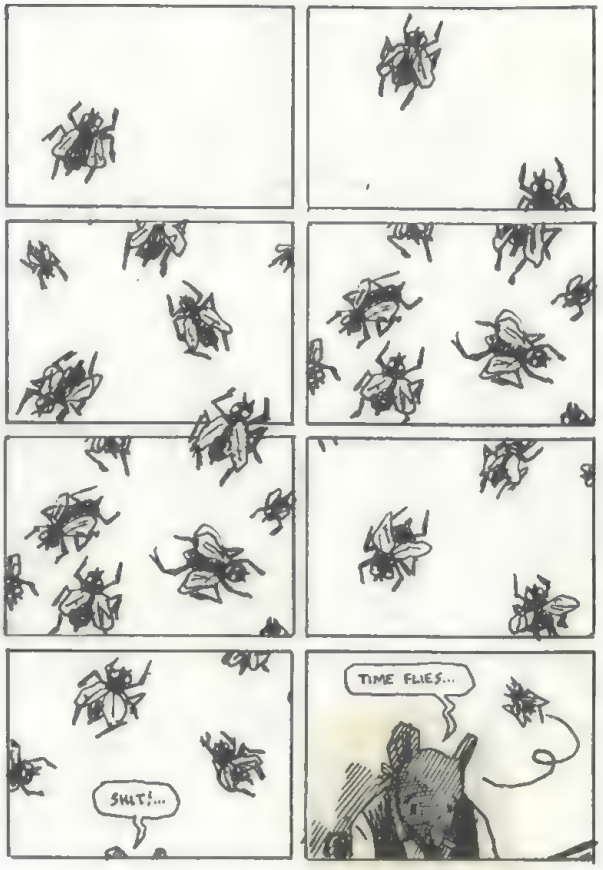

Fig. 4: Second draft of *Time Flies* (Spiegelman 2011a, 161).

trauma victim (Bond/Craps, 79). This interdependence is stylistically accentuated since the page's de-narrativization primarily becomes visible through, and is thus arguably dependent on, the sequential sections that frame it. De-narrativization, then, becomes palpable mainly as an act of erasure arising from a manipulation of a sequential *geno-text*, which differentiates it from ›non-narrativity‹ in more homogeneous, abstract comics.

Watchmen

De-narrativization also features prominently in fictional dramatizations of trauma by Alan Moore. Several of his most iconic figures – eponymous V in *V for Vendetta* (1982-85), Joker in *The Killing Joke* (1988), and Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen* (1986-87) – represent traumatized individuals whose geneses are rooted in tragedy and loss. The sociopathic character traits of V, Joker and Rorschach are mythologized through extensive backstories that tell of imprisonment and torture (V), humiliation and economic despair (Joker), physical abuse and sexual traumatization (Rorschach). In perhaps the most intriguing fictionalization of trauma, Dr. Manhattan, the prescient, teleporting superhero who attains supernatural powers in the wake of a nuclear accident, reflects on his death and rebirth while travelling to Mars, thereby showcasing his peculiar relationship to free will, time, and to traumatic memories he cannot erase or meaningfully process.

The opening page of Chapter 4, which narrates his genesis (Fig. 5), shows Manhattan poised on a Martian rock, contemplating a damaged photo of his former self next to Janey while vaguely referring to the two of them as »a man and a woman [...] at an amusement park, in 1959«. Manhattan's curious emotional detachment from the story of his death and rebirth reveals a reluctance to engage with a troubling memory. His impeccable foresight, illustrated through his prediction that he will »drop

THE PHOTOGRAPH IS IN MY HAND.
IT IS THE PHOTOGRAPH OF A MAN AND A WOMAN. THEY ARE AT AN AMUSEMENT PARK, IN 1959.
IN TWELVE SECONDS TIME, I DROP THE PHOTOGRAPH TO THE SAND AT MY FEET. WALK NO AWAY. IT'S ALREADY LYING THERE. TWELVE SECONDS INTO THE FUTURE.
TEN SECONDS NOW
THE PHOTOGRAPH IS IN MY HAND
I FOUND IT IN A DERELICT BAR AT THE GILA FLATS TEST BASE, TWENTY-SEVEN HOURS AGO
IT'S STILL THERE. TWENTY SEVEN HOURS INTO THE PAST, IN ITS FRAME, IN THE DARKENED BAR
I'M STILL THERE, LOOKING AT IT
THE PHOTOGRAPH IS IN MY HAND. THE WOMAN TAKES A PIECE OF POPCORN BETWEEN THUMB AND FOREFINGER. THE FERRIS WHEEL PAUSES.
SEVEN SECONDS NOW
IT'S OCTOBER 1985. I'M ON MARS. IT'S JULY, 1959. I'M IN NEW JERSEY, AT THE PALISADES AMUSEMENT PARK.
FOUR SECONDS THREE
I'M TIRED OF LOOKING AT THE PHOTOGRAPH NOW
I OPEN MY FINGERS. IT FALLS TO THE SAND AT MY FEET.
I AM GOING TO LOOK AT THE STARS
THEY ARE SO FAR AWAY, AND THEIR LIGHT TAKES SO LONG TO REACH US.
ALL WE EVER SEE OF STARS ARE THEIR OLD PHOTOGRAPHS.
1

Fig. 5: Opening page of Chapter 4 (*Watchmaker*) in *Watchmen* (111).

the photograph in [his] hand [...] twelve seconds into the future«, seems undermined by an unarticulated, residual emotive hurt that exhausts him (»I'm tired of looking at the photograph now«). Manhattan's deliberate close-reading of the photograph – a peculiar response given his perfect recall – resembles a futile attempt to deal with, and narrate, emotional pain. The mental roadblock he encounters seems directly related to his cognition: by no longer inhabiting a present – a concept that loses significance in the light of his time-travelling powers – Manhattan has also lost the ability to narrate meaningfully and chronologically, which in turn reduces his utterances to mere discourse, or a running commentary on his actions.

Devoid of a deictic compass that roots him in an experiential human present, Manhattan also lacks the ability to work through trauma – a process that is contingent on an incremental blunting of memories through narrativization (Bond/Craps, 78–79). Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth defines working-through as a »transformation of trauma into a *narrative memory* that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own and other's knowledge of the past« in order to »lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall« (quoted in Bond/Craps, 79, emphasis added). Manhattan struggles to create such a blunted narrative memory since he recalls events precisely, with undiminished clarity. His mnemonic strength turns out to be a major liability with respect to processing a traumatic past, since his vivid and unchanging recollections of traumatic rupture feed endless narrative loops of emotive hurt – a process symbolically visualized through the circular icon tattooed on his forehead.

Like in the *Time Flies* sequence discussed earlier, de-narrativization turns a protagonist (Manhattan) into a mere commentator who discourses rather than narrates, and observes rather than acts. His loss of agency is effectively conveyed through temporal asynchronies between verbal articulations of physical actions and visual representations of such actions; the second panel shows Manhattan's photograph lying on the ground even though verbally – as the caption states – it is still in his hand. This bifurcation of a unified temporal chronotope forestalls the making a coherent, linear narrative, and thwarts a meaningful emotive response, which – arguably – likewise necessitates being deictically rooted in a present. Manhattan's mechanical countdown (»Ten seconds now.« / »I'm still there, looking at it.« / »Seven seconds now.«) depersonalizes his voice, and suppresses any sense of a personal, emotional experience. At the same time, his narrative stasis carries undertones of unprocessed emotive pain, figuratively represented through his statement that the photograph of Janey and him is »still [hanging] there, twenty-seven hours into the past, in its frame, in the darkened bar« – an extended metaphor that encapsulates how Manhattan's recollections of loss and hurt endure. Abrupt visual cuts between panels, echoed through startling use of present tense (»The photograph *is*«, »I *drop* the photograph«, »It*'s* still there«, »I*'m* on Mars«, emphasis added), also suggest that Manhattan no longer perceives actions as dependent on a future-oriented chronology, but witnesses them as discrete moments embedded in an ever-lasting present. Past, present and future

collapse in a sea of signification in which time (years, months, seconds) and place (Mars, New Jersey, a bar, an amusement park) become mere coordinates for locating actions rather than settings that structure a coherent narrative.

Manhattan's achronological perception and his residual trauma are effectively conveyed through a clever *mise-en-page* (Cohn) in which the arrangement of panels undermines sequential narration. While Manhattan's voice-over determines the sequence in which the panels are to be read, clusters of identical and near-identical panels (panels 1-3 are echoed in panels 7-9) evoke a *déjà-vu* that mimics the circularity of Manhattan's prose.[2] The central positioning of Janey's close-up in panel 5, framed by panels which *all* feature the same photograph in some shape or form – in Manhattan's hand, on the ground, or pinned to a wall – iconizes Janey, and makes her dominate the entire page. The dispassionate tone of Manhattan's voice-over, which downplays the significance of Janey, referring to her as »the woman« rather than his former significant other, is invalidated by his undeniable fascination with the photograph that troubles and tires him (»I open my fingers. It falls to the sand at my feet.«). While Manhattan's emotionless prose and his deliberate dropping of the photo suggests a sense of control, the fetishizing of Janey as the central signifier dominating the entire page suggests the opposite, and bespeaks the power she still holds over him.

Undermining sequential narration through clever visual and verbal effects (voice, repetition and *mise-en-page*), this excerpt from *Watchmen* de-narrativizes Manhattan's narrative by shifting his utterances towards mere discourse while undermining the linearity of his prose through paradigmatic signification. Structuring the entire scene around an old photograph placed iconically at the centre, the page creates a sense of narrative stasis that figuratively represents how Manhattan's residual trauma has become a defining part of his timeless self. The passage's de-narrativization thus effectively contributes to his characterization as it dramatizes his inability to work through the trauma that gave birth to his persona.

Persepolis

An artist who adapts Spiegelman's and Moore's paradigmatic code-switching to convey autobiographical memories of childhood trauma is Marjane Satrapi, whose *Persepolis* (2000-04) regularly suspends narration through slow-paced, contemplative panels that articulate the confusion and hurt the persona-artist sustained while growing up in post-revolutionary Iran. A memorable instance where de-narrativization comes to the fore occurs in a splash of ›Marji‹ floating in space (Fig. 6), which constitutes the final page of Part 1 in the original, quadripartite French edition. The page marks a crisis point triggered by the execution of Marji's uncle Anoosh – her personal hero – by the Iranian regime. On the double spread preceding this panel, Marji has just learnt of Anoosh's death through a

newspaper propaganda piece (»Russian Spy [sic] Executed«), which leads her to violently reject the imaginary God figure that comforted her in earlier crises (»Shut up, you! Get out of my life!!! I never want to see you again!«). Directly following a narrow, crammed and emotionally intense panel in which Marji tells God to »Get out!«, the expansive splash of Marji floating in space powerfully captures the spiritual and emotional void she feels after losing Anoosh and her faith in God.

AND SO I WAS LOST WITHOUT ANY BEARINGS. WHAT COULD BE WORSE THAN THAT?
MARJI, RUN TO THE BASEMENT! WE'RE BEING BOMBED!
IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR.

Fig. 6: Marji floating in space (Satrapi, 71).

Just like in the excerpts from *Maus* and *Watchmen*, the composition of the page takes the reader beyond previously established chronotopes as various spatialities and temporalities are merged in one single frame. The random assortment of celestial bodies – drawn in childlike simplicity and featuring Saturn, an all-time children's favourite – accentuates her age, and her incipient agnosticism. By substituting a religious signifier (God) typically located in heaven with celestial bodies expressing a secular view of the cosmos, the unlit space enveloping Marji visualizes her rite of passage. Her distinct body language – floating at an angle, with arms stretched out – mimics that transformation by showing her appropriate a common Christ-like pose (with arms outstretched) to capture the individualized suffering she undergoes at that point.[3] The same posture is used four panels earlier when Marji is shown lying at an angle on a white bedspread, crying. By replacing the white bedspread with an expansive dark space, and the emanata signifying emotional release with an expressionless face signaling a repression of emotion, the excerpted splash dramatizes her interiorizing of trauma, and – arguably – a temporary de-coupling from linear time. Silent and only signifying through her body language, Marji has become voiceless and inert. The disruption of her dialogue with God, which will prove final – the bearded God-figure does not appear again later on in the narrative – signals a rupture with her surroundings, triggering a deep-set trauma.

Mimicking effects observed in the excerpts from *Maus* and *Watchmen* above, the splash de-narrativizes the scene by decelerating pace (through augmenting panel size) and privileging paradigmatic signification over linear sequentiality. The normative left-to-right syntax

is largely suspended and only faintly sustained through minimalist captions framing the image, which elicit a diagonal reading of the page from the top left-hand corner towards the bottom right. The extensive use of negative space and the random assortment of planets and stars encourage a non-linear, paradigmatic reading similar to the exploration of a visual art piece. The deployment of ambiguous visual elements further decelerates the page, and amplifies the de-coupling of the narrative from sequentiality. Several subtexts – notably the darkness that envelops Marji (signifying what exactly?), her pose (meant to evoke Western culture?), and the childlike assortment of starts (a universe that comforts or deracinates?) – remain largely unexplained, as are the causal links between Marji's trauma and the range of possible triggers (the execution of Uncle Anoosh, her loss of faith, the bomb raids). As in the passages from *Maus* and *Watchmen*, de-narrativization shifts the onus of constructing a coherent narrative onto the reader, as the page paradigmatically elicits possible narratives instead of narrating sequentially.

Temporal ambiguity is likewise present, albeit to a lesser extent than in the previous excerpts. The chronological arrangement of the three main signifiers – the captions describing Anoosh's death and the beginning of war, Marji's dejection, and the bomb warning – is quite vague, making the reader wonder whether Marji's paralysis precedes, coincides with, or follows the bomb warnings. The dramatic progression to the captions (»And so I was lost, without bearing … What could be worse than that?« / »It was the beginning of war.«) suggest that Marji's life changed from bad (Anoosh's death) to worse (the beginning of war, characterized by bomb raids). Then again, by representing some of the stars in shapes that resemble the large jagged speech bubble announcing a bomb warning, the splash panel suggest that Marji's visual metaphor of a secular sky might be informed by the experience of bomb raids she may be partially unaware of, or may be trying to suppress. Satrapi's handling of temporalities becomes unreliable at this point, as unresponsive Marji, along with the ambiguously defined room or space she inhabits, blurs the chronotopes that offer clear linear guardrails in the preceding section of her narrative. The temporal stasis articulated in this panel attains further significance in the light of the historical trauma Marji is experiencing. Trauma theory suggests that trigger events are often incompletely witnessed when they occur, and only belatedly »assimilated or experienced« (Bond/Craps, 56). A similar time lapse is articulated here by representing Marji as passive and unresponsive to either bomb raids or warnings, illustrating how her mental anguish temporarily stalls the progression of her own narrative.

This excerpt from *Persepolis*, then, decelerates the page compositionally (through an effective use of panel size, negative space and the positioning of elements within the frame) and iconographically (through deploying ambiguous elements such as the spiky stars, which may represent unheeded bomb warnings). By feeding a fast-paced, conflicted dialogue into an expansive still that shows Marji entering a trauma-induced state beyond

time, the page achieves a modal switch from syntactic narration to paradigmatic signification that echoes similar effects in the previous examples. By leveraging de-narrativization for a powerful cliffhanger ending, Satrapi underscores the power invested in such code-switching, and demonstrates how effectively comics can express the corrosive effects of traumatic experiences in artistic form.

Daytripper

De-narrativization need not necessarily dramatize an acting out of traumatic memory, but may also signify a successful working-through, or processing, of trauma. *Daytripper* (2011) by twin artists Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá offers a prime example illustrating such usage: de-narrativized sections facilitate disturbing cliffhanger endings but also serene passages in which the text acknowledges, articulates and addresses residual traumatic memory.

Daytripper bears striking similarities to a fractured trauma narrative, both thematically and structurally, as the serial deaths of protagonist Brás at the end of every chapter are neither foreshadowed nor explained in the following sections, forcing the reader to interpret, or narrativize, how these catastrophes relate to the various narrative strands. Seemingly out of the blue, Brás gets shot at a bar (32), drowns during a local folk festival (56), gets run over minutes after he has fallen in love (80), dies from a heart attack shortly after having become a father (104), electrocutes himself while flying a kite as a child (128), or is stabbed by the long-lost friend he has come to rescue (174). These oddly unmotivated shock endings are followed by short mock obituaries that drily state the cause of death (e.g. »He died at the age of 33 in a car crash on his way to Rio« (152)), followed by often quite cynical interpretations of how one may read his life in the light of these catastrophes: »He was 38 and died because he believed in friendship.« (176) / »Some might say [...] God works in mysterious ways« (152). The bitter tone of these codas suggests a superficial registering, and emotive suppressing, of the impact of these catastrophes, likening the entire text to a trauma episode in which tragedies are recorded, but only assimilated and experienced belatedly.

Unlike the previous examples, where traumatic events are linked to genocide (*Maus*), oppressive regimes (*Persepolis*) or nuclear accidents (*Watchmen*), the agent inflicting trigger events on the protagonist is – in an existentialist vein – life itself. Reconciling oneself to mortality is the key theme of the penultimate chapter in which Brás, now an octogenarian who has chosen to terminate his cancer treatment, dozes off in a daydream in which he remembers snippets of memories from his childhood, adolescence and adulthood, amalgamated into a stream-of-consciousness-like medley composed of assorted vignettes from earlier chapters. The fast-paced rollercoaster of Brás's frag-

mented memories comes to a halt in a serene page where he converses with his son at his grandparent's farm, a bucolic idyll celebrated in a previous chapter (Fig. 7). Like most vignettes in this chapter, the scene blends disparate temporalities by imagining an encounter of grandfather, father and son, thus breaking with the main plot's chronotope, since Brás's father passes away the very day Brás's son is born.

LIFE IS LIKE A BOOK SON
AND EVERY BOOK HAS AN END
NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU LIKE THAT BOOK
YOU WILL GET TO THE LAST PAGE
AND IT WILL END
NO BOOK IS COMPLETE WITHOUT ITS END
AND ONCE YOU GET THERE
ONLY WHEN YOU READ THE LAST WORDS
WILL YOU SEE HOW GOOD THE BOOK IS
IT FEELS REAL

Fig. 7: Excerpt from Brás's dream sequence (Moon and Bá, *Daytripper*, 218)

Mimicking the manner in which an ageing, dreaming Brás comes to terms with his impending death, the scene shows Brás teaching his son to accept or even embrace mortality. Visual cues connoting death – notably the kite, with which Brás electrocutes himself as a young boy, but also the grandfather, whose appearance in the preceding chapters regularly coincides with lethal freak accidents – are counterpointed by Brás's soothing allegory comparing death to a good book ending: »Life is like a book, son.« / »And every book has an end.« / »No matter how much you like that book …« / »... you will get to the last page…« (Fig. 7). Delivered by a character who once made his living writing obituaries, whose life ambition consisted of matching the writing skills of his father, and who is now standing elusively underneath a tree representing continuity across generations, Brás's analogy seems perfectly in keeping with his character, and particularly pertinent. By aligning Brás's embracing of life as a book ending with the structural ruptures defining each chapter ending, the text asks readers to accept the finality of artistic narratives, including the book they are reading. This clever multimodal switch from narrative (Brás's imaginary monologue) to paratext (the material physicality of text at hand) stalls narration, and invites readers to reflect on their own attitudes towards mortality and the narrative at hand. Delivered in front of a tree where Brás's late father sought inspiration, one can see multiple ways in which the panel bridges writing and the materiality of books on the one hand, and mortality, death and endings on the other: verbally (by articulating the

analogy), iconographically (with the tree connoting intergenerational continuity), intratextually (through the kite referencing a premature death), compositionally (by placing the page shortly before the book ending), and perhaps even etymologically (the words for *book* are cognate with the word *beech* in many languages).[4]

Formally, the stalling or de-narrativizing of Brás's daydream on the excerpted page (Fig. 7) is also achieved through a skillful handling of the formal apparatus. In the dominating panel, Moon and Bá go diametrically against Will Eisner's advice to keep speech bubbles short and concise (60). They construct an elongated, multi-sectional speech bubble whose pentapartite arc traces the shape of the tree, and slowly guides the reader through the image. The unusual partitioning of Brás's utterance into smaller, easily digestible bits decelerates the reading, and draws attention to unusual visual choices, such as the surreally defoliating, evergreen tree offering shade to the mysterious presence of the grandfather. Contrasting the meditative right-to-left arc of the extended speech bubble is a thinner, contrapuntal line of the kite's string, running from Brás's raised hand to the panel's top right-hand corner, which connotes his happy childhood and its transience, as the kite's string electrocutes Brás when it touches a power line. Speech bubble and string, then, effectively frame the multigenerational vision evoked in the dominating panel, imagining a never-experienced harmony of childhood and old age in a bucolic rural setting.

This soothing de-narrativization which may be considered a working-through of multiple structural traumas – Brás's loss of his father, and his deeply conflicted relationship to his father – is also achieved through a minimizing of the gutter, which is either absent due to the bleed running from the top panel to the smaller satellite panels, or mitigated through large panel sizes that reduce the total number of frames and the gutters separating them. Sidelining gutters reduces sequentiality and augments paradigmatic signification, like in the examples from *Maus*, *Watchmen* and *Persepolis*, though the intended effect is very different. While the previous artists de-narrativize to evoke a sense of narrative (and perhaps cognitive) stasis, Moon and Bá evoke a contemplative, accepting stasis signaling the protagonist's embracing of his mortality.

Rather than delaying the narration of traumatic events, *Daytripper* dramatizes a coming-together of narrative strands (key episodes defining Brás's life) and a healing of emotional pain (felt by Brás, those around him, and vicariously shared by the reader). By switching from syntactic narration to paradigmatic signification and from text (Brás's narration) to paratext (the materiality of the graphic novel itself), Moon and Bá leverage the multidimensionality of comics to articulate a life-affirming, existentialist view of mortality. By skillfully deploying speech bubbles and gutters to support those modal switches, Moon and Bá also underscore the ways in which the formal apparatus is key to achieving de-narrativization in a given text.

If Einstein's right …

A recent graphic trauma narrative which adapts some of the de-narrativizing techniques identified earlier, *If Einstein's right …* (2018) by Alan Moore, illustrated by Melinda Gebbie, attempts to acknowledge the pain and hurt sustained by an entire community. A tribute to the victims of the Grenfell Towers Fire, the comic uses 24 panels referencing the 24 floors of the building to memorialize the 72 victims who perished in the blaze. The elegy blends unusual verbal choices (enclosed rhyme) with striking visual ones that mimic techniques discussed above. Written to comfort a hurting community in the wake of a preventable disaster, the comic illustrates how code-switching allows artists to reach beyond conventional chronotopes, and find a language that can verbalize and address collective trauma.

Like the *Time Flies* excerpt discussed above, the Grenfell tribute comments rather than narrates. The actual events at Grenfell surrounding the blaze and its devastating effect on the inhabitants remain unspoken. Instead, it is the pain felt by the survivors, and the neglect by key decision-makers, whose lack of oversight arguably caused the fire, which move into the foreground. The text clearly intends to contribute to an ongoing discussion rather than establish a sequence of events; the opening line »Don't fret« (Fig. 8) roots the passage in prior responses to the Grenfell fire, turning it into a meta-commentary similar to Spiegelman's reflection on the relaying of Vladek's memories in *Time Flies*. Barbed attacks on perceived culprits such as Boris Johnson – »A Bullingdon Club Clown« who unconscionably »cu[t] [fire services] to the bone« – continue in this vein, and propose that the »disgrace and shame« of failed leadership will not be forgotten, a claim visually reinforced through static black and white mug shots that signify paradigmatically rather than syntagmatically, and conjure up a narrative that is elicited rather than told.

DON'T FRET. IF EINSTEIN'S RIGHT THEN TIME IS WRONG.
A SHADOW THAT OUR MINDS CAST AS THEY PASS
THROUGH SOLID SPACETIME'S CHANGELESS 4D GLASS
WHERE EVERY MOMENT'S AN ETERNAL SONG
AND NOTHING DIES AND NOTHING GOES AWAY
EACH LIFE'S HELD SAFE AMIDST THE CENTURIES
AN ARCHIVED FILM WITH EVERY FRAME ON FREEZE
IN WHICH OUR LEGENDS ENDLESSLY REPLAY
ONE'S IN A CELLAR CLUB OFF NOTTING HILL
HER AND HER HUSBAND DANCING, BOTH ALIVE
THAT AUGUST NIGHT IN NINETEEN SIXTY-FIVE
ITS MUSIC NEVER STOPPED SHE'S DANCING STILL
WHILE UP IN TWENTY-TEN ONE SMILES IN PRIDE
AT WIFE, SON, DAUGHTER, BABY, ALL AT PLAY
JUST AFTER RAMADAN THE PARK THAT DAY
WITH EVERLASTING DAZZLE ON THE SLIDE
BUT THAT SAME YEAR A BULLINGDON CLUB CLOWN
SWEARS THAT HE'LL LEAVE FIRE SERVICES ALONE.
THEN, THREE YEARS LATER, CUTS THEM TO THE BONE.
SAYS 'GET STUFFED' AS TEN STATIONS ARE CLOSED DOWN
208217
AND TWENTY-SEVEN ENGINES
HE ALSO SHALL ENDURE FOREVERMORE.
HIS TREACHERIES CAUGHT IN TIME'S AMBER, FOR
DISGRACE AND SHAME ARE BOTH ETERNAL, TOO

Fig. 8: Opening page from *If Einstein's right …* (Moore et al., 57).

As in *Watchmen*, temporalities play a key role for such de-narrativization. Whereas the opening to the Mars chapter erodes sequentiality to illustrate Manhattan's latent trauma, *If Einstein's right …* evokes a static, timeless present to celebrate the indelible mark the Grenfell victims left on the minds of their communities. The notion of linear time, according to which a life cut short represents a tragedy, is a fallacy, Moore and Gebbie suggest: »If Einstein is right«, the opening panel states, then »[the popular perception of] time is wrong«; seen »through solid spacetime's changeless 4d glass«, the moment of parting becomes irrelevant, as »every moment's an eternal song« (Fig. 8). Here the skillful use of a metaphysical conceit cleverly blurs the traumatic narrative at hand, and defamiliarizes the anticipated narrative of grief and loss by depriving readers of a conventional, stable chronotope, substituting it with a more elusive, four-dimensional »spacetime«. By delivering this inspirational monologue through an Einstein figure whose multiple bodies – inhabit the first panel in three physical shapes, and appear four times on film in the second panel, Gebbie's illustration cleverly visualizes Moore's mind-boggling conceit. »If Einstein's right«, then presence and absence, simultaneity and asynchrony, are interchangeable. Lives do not pass; they simply are. From such a vantage point, grief loses its justification and purpose, since – as the second panel states – »[N]othing dies. And nothing goes away.«

Echoing the *Daytripper* excerpt above, de-narrativized stasis is also facilitated through a skillful reconfiguring of the formal apparatus. While comics conventionally use speech bubbles to attribute a particular utterance to a clearly definable character, or perhaps a group of characters speaking in unison, Moore and Gebbie construct a monologue which initially appears to be Einstein's, yet is gradually sustained by an ever-expanding chorus of characters representing deceased Grenfell victims: »One [memory]'s in a cellar club off Notting Hill«, the smiling female dancer in yellow chimes in, seamlessly continuing the mellow musicality of Einstein's voice. Her turn ended, the narrative is continued by her dance partner (»That August night in nineteen sixty-five«), who hands over to the cheering family in the following panel. This highly unusual, musical-inspired use of speech bubbles as a means of connoting a shared chorus attains significance in the context of the Grenfell fire, as it figuratively offers victims a voice, and signals their importance, status and the right to be heard. Such an imaginary turn-taking among various victims also de-narrativizes the sequence: since the order in which characters speak seems quite random (there is no reason why e.g. the dancers in panel 3 should not swap with the speakers in panel 4), the visual elements within the panels become interchangeable. While the verbal syntax of the discourse stabilizes the directionality of the text, the entropy of their visual elements undermines the panels' sequentiality, similarly to the ways in which the *Watchmen* visuals undercut the linearity of Manhattan's discourse.

De-narrativization is also achieved through distinctly anachronistic language. By expressing its tenets through mellifluous enclosed rhyme rather than plain prose, the narration achieves a timelessness arising from the anachronism of describing a current event through

iambic pentameter, evoking a sense of continuity across the ages. »If Einstein's right«, the text seems to say, communicating in enclosed rhyme is perfectly normal, since neither the victims nor such language will ever »g[o] away«. The same archaic verse assumes more bitter and accusatory notes in the sarcastic panels where neglectful politicians are mercilessly skewered through antiquated language, suggesting that their failures, too, »shall endure forevermore«. The clever switching from speech bubbles to voice-over disempowers the caricatured politicians portrayed, and lends weight to the physical representation of their guilt – their prison number – which assumes their voice. Whereas the Grenfell victims are commemorated for their virtues and community spirit, political culprits shall be remembered not for who they are, but for their »treacheries«, which »are [...] eternal, too.«

The static de-narrativization achieved through a timeless celebration of victims, and an equally permanent staining of political culprits, reveals this text to be more invested in discourse, opinion, judgment and commemoration than in any narrative endeavor as such. The tribute evokes narratives without narrating; it commemorates by jogging memories; it praises and accuses to do justice; and it proposes a balancing compulsive narrative loops of grief with loops of praise and shame – an approach resembling a constructive working-through, or processing, of a trauma episode by blunting the original narrative. By countering the traumatic narrative of Grenfell with a metacommentary celebrating the victims while holding those responsible to account, the artists powerfully demonstrate the multimodal capacity of comics to engage with audiences by moving beyond established chronotopes and conventional narrative structures. Playing with clever conceits of timelessness, asynchrony and polyvalence, their tribute acts as a well-timed panacea for the pain and hurt sustained by the Grenfell victims.

Conclusion

De-narrativization constitutes an effective strategy enabling comic artists to comment on, and articulate, the lacunae inherent in trauma narratives. Unlike the non-narrativity aspired to in abstract comics, such de-narrativization is temporary, and serves as a code-switching that disrupts, though never completely displaces, a dominant, sequential narrative. This hierarchy between dominant sequential codes and supplementary de-narrativized sequences is well expressed by Art Spiegelman, who claims that

> if Maus was overloaded with visual stunts and ideas it would become something else. I had to use such things sparingly. In one panel, on page 127, when Vladek and Anja are in hiding, they walk along a road, not knowing where to go for safety, and the branches of the road form a swastika. It's quite visually dramatic, but that kind of metaphoric use of space couldn't be allowed to overwhelm the literal use of space, because then you wouldn't believe in the space anymore. (2011a, 185)

Spiegelman's statement that a »metaphoric use of space« (corresponding to the de-narrativized examples discussed above) may not supersede a »literal use of space« (corresponding to sequential narratives), aligns with the examples discussed above, where de-narrativization emerges as a disruptive tool that modifies rather than completely rewrites a given text through strategic interruptions.

De-narrativization also represents a core strategy allowing an artist to come to terms with the unrepresentability of trauma. By de-coupling an entire page from sequentiality, comic artists tap into paradigmatic modes of signification that offer more latitude to articulate signifiers than straightforward narration. By mimicking endless narrative loops through an effective reconfiguration of composition and parts of the formal apparatus (notably speech bubbles), graphic artists give voice to a narrative stasis that eludes sequential narration. In the excerpts discussed, acting out becomes palpable as a loss of directionality, and an increase of a panel sequence's entropy – patterns which empower readers through the loosening of authorial control over how a particular sequence is to be read. However, de-narrativized sequences may also be deployed to model a successful working-through of trauma, as in the excerpts from *Daytripper* and *If Einstein's right …*, where a temporary suspending of chronotopes and sequentiality serves to acknowledge and process mental hurt rooted in residual traumatic memory.

As a hybrid medium combining sequentiality with paradigmatic signification, comics offer a particularly rich gamut of modalities to convey traumatic experience. The modal switches described above testify to the ways in which graphic artists stall narration while sustaining visual discourse, thus underscoring the potential of comics as a powerful artistic medium. While writers and artists working in other genres have likewise attempted to narrate beyond conventional chronotopes, it is the multimediality of comics which lends such modal switches particular significance, and elevates de-narrativized sequences to poignant, memorable moments.

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1] Both drafts also echo »more abstract«, »experimental« (2011a, 165) single-page comics like *Don't Get Around Much Anymore* (1973) and *Day at the Circus* (1975) (Spiegelman 2011a, 169, 188), which Spiegelman – inspired by »nonnarrative films« (2011a, 169) – created during intense bouts of depression. One works like a board game-like maze which pretends to offer significantly different paths from panel to panel, only to loop them all back to the opening panel (2011a, 188); the other consists of a page where semi-identical panels create visual echoes and cross-references that decelerate the pace to a crawl (2011a, 169).

2] More panels are repeated throughout the first three pages. On the significance of panel repetition in that very sequence, see Rantala (24-40).

3] Note that Satrapi tells of a similar appropriation of a Christian *topos* when describing how she used Michelangelo's *Pietà* as the template for a mandatory Iranian propaganda piece when applying for an art exam in Teheran (Satrapi, 283).

4] See the etymologies of English *book*, German *Buch*, Dutch *boeken* and Danish *bog* (etymonline).

CLOSURE
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Comics, Non-Narrativity, Non-Eventfulness

Three Examples From Brazil

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Is All ›Noneventfulness‹ Nonnarrative?

In this article, we propose an examination of stylistics in contemporary comics, with a focus on possible correlations between low (or zero) levels of eventfulness and the preservation of narrative matrices. While dealing with a corpus of Brazilian contemporary comic artists,[1] we will be questioning the customary treatment of non-eventfulness in comics studies, which consists of implying the complete nullification of narrativity by weaker or lacking eventfulness. We shall argue that this entailment of ›low‹ or ›non-eventfulness‹ by ›non-narrativity‹ is problematic, and we will advocate for a momentary dissociation between ›narrativity‹ and ›intrigue‹.

The particular connection between ›narrative‹ and ›intrigue‹ (or ›plot‹) is a fundamental theme of narrative theories. It ranges from the Aristotelian ›*müthos*‹ to the ›*syuzhet*‹ of Russian formalists and characterizes the notion that the discursive representation of events, proper to ›narrative‹, implies the presentation of events being structured using a ›lacunar‹ state of semantic information about the story. To function in intriguing ways, narrative discourse maneuvers such informational incompleteness of the story level (formalists have christened it the ›fabula‹), either in terms of the successive order of its conclusion or in the aspects that allow us to connect characters and their motivations. The ›intrigued‹ aspect of this configuration is the matrix which defines the narrative as being committed to certain paradigmatic states of expectation generated in its readership, such as ›suspense‹, ›curiosity‹ and ›surprise‹ (Baroni, 91–160).

The idea of its object being a medium essentially designed for telling stories constantly haunts comics studies. This ›narrative imperative‹ is theoretically and historically imposed for the systematic understanding of its most elementary units, generally identified as a syntactic structure – whether in terms of ›linear‹ ordering (proper of strips) or the ›tabular‹ configuration of pages and spreads (Fresnault-Deruelle, 7–23; Peeters, 52–77).[2]

This phenomenon also characterizes the sources of comics scholarship: it articulates itself in branches of literary theories devoted to narratological devices of literariness (see Jakobson), in media studies and its emphasis on functional/textual aspects of comics' ›spatio-topic system‹ (Groensteen 1999, 31–120), and in cultural history, especially studies on arts of drawing in different periods (see Kunzle).

Apparently, at least in the case of comics studies, this narrative imperative is still manifested in an almost sectarian severity of positions. According to these positions, graphic sequentiality should or should not imply a narrative principle, with no middle ground between these respective positions. Therefore, the evocation of alternative styles, such as ›abstract comics‹ (see Molotiu), or even particular modulations of visual sequences in canonical works such as ›non-sequitur‹ (McCloud, 72), seem to reflect an absolute, insurmountable delimitation between ›narrativity‹ and ›non-narrativity‹ – the critical implications of which are still poorly examined in comics scholarship.

The proposal for this issue of CLOSURE somewhat reinforces such delimitations between sequential regimes of panel organization in comics when stating that ›our issue investigates non-narrative comics beyond the diegetic, beyond sequence, towards abstraction‹.[3] In particular, by token of the ›low eventfulness‹ required for inter-iconic correlations within graphic sequences of strips and pages in certain styles of comics, critics are divided between two main attitudes. On one hand, they allow for a complete subtraction of any degree of narrativity governing the visual syntax of panel compositions, either in strips or spreads (see Schmitt); on the other hand, in alignment with the spirit of our present argument, they try to approach abstraction from a more relativist vantage point, as they preserve narrative potentials in these cases – either from a culturalist-historical standpoint (Baetens 2011) or a syntactic-cognitive one (Cohn 2015).

In our proposition, we value the ›non‹ or ›low‹ eventfulness (Hühn 2016)[4] of certain styles of comics, especially in those cases in which the production of sequential meaning corresponds to a visual and graphic syntax rather than outlining any storyline or ›portions of a fabula‹ (Eco 1979,172–186). At the same time, we limit this rejection of narrativity to the interactions between ›narrative‹ and ›intrigue‹ – or, in the terms of Russian Formalism, to ›syuzhet‹ (Tomachevski, 65). We thus problematize the extent to which narrative eventfulness entails the generation of ›narrative tension‹ (Baroni, 91–160) as paradigms either of ›suspense‹, ›curiosity‹, or ›surprise‹ (Sternberg, 159–182).

From our standpoint, such assumptions that narrative eventfulness is necessarily structured as a ›plot‹ about characters or as series of events constitute overstatements. In contrast to such positions, we acknowledge the survival of matrices of narrativity which are derived from lower levels of eventfulness in certain stylistic schools of the art of comics.

If we adopt, for instance, criteria more associated with ›thematic‹ dimensions of a good part of these alleged ›non-narrative‹ styles (for instance, in representing everyday life

and its anodyne routines), we experience some difficulty in justifying strict separations between ›narrativity‹ and ›non-narrativity‹. Works like *Jimmy Corrigan* (Ware 2000) or *Here* (McGuire 2014) actually do attenuate (or even nullify) an ›intrigued‹ sense of textual succession governing the relationship of characters and events through the styles of panel composition (in Chris Ware's case) or successive page spreads (in Richard McGuire's instance).

Even so, these works still employ narrative modulations suggestive of temporal dimensions of the graphic forms. The difference here resides in the fact that such operations are more dependent on the ›interactional patterns‹ (Jauss, 152–163; Baroni, 179–197) entailed by these styles. Such styles ascribe implied uses to the proper experience of particular features of comics storytelling; the remaining narrativity of such ›non-eventfulness‹ is a result of probabilistic horizons of ›aesthetic responses‹ to these works, thus serving as instructional clues these texts provide about the ›implicit‹ or ›modeled‹ readership (see Ingarden 1973, Iser 1974, Eco 1979).

And even if we adopt the perspective of ›modal‹ patterns of textual organization of the narrative sequence (Genette, 163–218), we must consider the heuristic losses derived from the pure rejection of ›low eventfulness‹. The aesthetic evaluation of empty times, as a principle of organization of vast portions – and even the totality – of certain contemporary comic books still offers us elements of surviving narrativity; for even *when nothing happens* in these particular comics, there still survives a sense of eventfulness (see Schneider).

Moreover, this separation between a ›low‹ (or ›null‹) occurrence of actions and its assumed ›non-narrativity‹ requires us to refine the understanding of canonical narrative succession not yet governed by any eventful sense of disjunction. In this, we take up the Structuralist consideration of subsets of narrative functions, such as ›catalysis‹ (Barthes 1966, 8–11) or ›satellites‹ (Chatman 1980, 53–55): previously, we have already explored potential applications of these functions to comics scholarship in the case of Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin* (see Araújo and Picado 2016).

Structuring the Argument: The Concepts and the Corpus

Briefly, in response to the challenging topic of the present issue on ›non-narrativity‹ in comics, we intend to speculate on aspects of ›non-eventfulness‹ possibly governing certain styles of a *poetics of comics*. Indeed, we advance a more nuanced consideration of the assumed nullification of narrativity: notwithstanding the importance of non-eventfulness in a ›stylistic‹ approach to comics studies, we still acknowledge the persistence of an organizing principle for drawing sequentiality in contemporary styles of this medium – which inspires us to question that ›non-eventfulness‹ entails the rejection of narrativity.

We recognize that canonical definitions of narrativity are generally correlated with aspects of a more ›intrigued‹ or ›plotted‹ configuration of eventful succession, regardless of genres, materials and means of narrative expression. We wish to distance ourselves from such assumptions; however, we still hypothesize that there is a need for differentiating ›low eventfulness‹ from strict ›non-narrativity‹, and therefore problematize the complete rejection of ›myth-functional‹ aspects of narrative sequentiality in contexts of visual/pictorial representation (see Picado 2008 and Schaeffer).

Finally, in order to explore these issues, we resort to comics within which thematic unity and sequential modulation are dissociated from the ›intriguing‹ nature of narrative events or agents. In our examples from Brazilian comics, we notice experiments that work against imperatives of a ›plotted‹ organization of eventful sequencing of actions, though not necessarily entailing any strict, radical refusal of any sense of narrativity.

This weakening of eventfulness in contemporary comics does not preclude the survival of visual and graphic succession, which make a sense of narrative discursivity operative. Such narrativity is clearly not structured upon ›discordant‹ aspects of its temporal poetics (Ricoeur, 21–65): therefore, it is not programmed to generate any kind of responsive interest from the readership directed upon its either *problematic* or *potentially resolutive eventfulness*. These comics preserve several operations of a more intriguing functionality, but are oriented towards kinds of ›aesthetic effects‹ (Iser 1979) which are attainable from the perspective of probabilistic competences ascribed to the potential reader (see Ingarden 1973a and Jauss).

We especially single out the ›iterative‹ principles of sequential organization (Genette, 111–126; Mikkonen, 33–70; Groensteen 2011, 43–46), particularly those signified by narrative modulations proper to ›catalysis‹ and ›satellites‹. These are counter-canonical structures of comic narratives, in which weaker segments of a story are functionally supportive of ›cardinal‹ moments (Barthes 1966, 8–11) or ›kernels‹ (Chatman 1980, 53–55).

While being instrumental for the canonical patterns of narrative exposition in classic graphic humor (Araújo and Picado 2016; Picado 2018), the intentional repetition of anodyne situations in these strips also serves as narrative leitmotif of contemporary graphic humor: the lower eventfulness in these segments deflates their sense of ›closure‹ (Barthes 1985, 381–401), while serving to promote ›argumentative‹ or ›rhetorical‹ regimes of textual exposition (Phelan, Chatman 1990).

If Not Intrigue, Then What?

Before we progress to the analysis of our corpus, we need to deal with the most crucial question for our thesis: in low eventfulness (or even non-narrative) comics, what incites the reading sequence that comprises iconic solidarity? Groensteen defines iconic solidarity as follows:

> interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated – this specification dismisses unique enclosed images within a profusion of patterns or anecdotes – and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence in praesentia (Groensteen 2007,18)

When examining abstract comics, Groensteen himself recognizes that intrigue is not the only source of its discursive function, but still propounds that a sequential and linear reading is necessary for them to be read as *comics*.

> If, on the other hand, the apparatus is recognized as being typical of comics, then its conventional configuration, possessed of its own potency, will invite a linear decoding, that is to say a reading, even if it is immediately obvious that the images, in this instance, do not represent, and consequently do not recount, anything. The apparatus invites the reader to look at the images one after another; contiguous images are perceived as consecutive, and this ordering constitutes a discourse, the discourse that vectorizes the visual field of a comics page. Instead of being viewed together, the images are caught in an oscillation between a global apprehension and a fragmented, one-after-another apprehension. It is under this condition that, while still not defined as a narrative, the drawn or painted surface ceases to be simply a tabular surface and becomes a comics page (Groensteen 2013, 13).

This emphasis on iconic solidarity founded on linearity rather than narrative is not impervious to challenges; after proposing infranarrative functions,[5] Groensteen's analysis of a Daniel Blancou strip is essentially narrative (Groensteen 2013, 18). This prompts Groensteen to conclude that the first reading of a comic is always narrative and that only when such reading fails, the reader might assign it to »the always improbable category of infranarrative comics« (19).[6] This is to say that Groensteen assumes that the reader attempts to construct a sequence before settling on a series of images as a mechanism of engendering meaning.

But our question is more foundational and subliminal: what transpires when there are elements to create a narrative sequence, but they are so thin that they are rendered incapable of supporting the interest of the reader to create these vectors? There is no intrigue to be found, no transformations of character, no eventful progressions, and no tension build-up or release of a punchline. Such passages do comprise clear narrative elements, but little intrigue, if any, can be found in clearly narrative and eventful comics. They appear as ›catalysis‹, minor actions with little intrigue or plot developments, acting as the unstressed parts of the story in contrast to the stressed ›cardinal moments‹ filled with eventfulness and tension about what happens next (Barthes 1966, 8–11). It is erroneous to assume that these ›catalysis‹ passages are mere preludes to what happens next (either as a delay tactic or even as necessary decompression after events), for their poetic and structural specificities go beyond those specific narrative functionalities.

Chris Ware is a masterful, poignant example in this regard. In his books, long passages are very low on eventfulness, the intrigue being reduced to a minimal level, and plots are considerably thin. Despite all this, the interest one concedes to such uneventful organization is

maintained by skillful arrangements of depicted situations, sometimes with minimal variations which deftly shift the reader's attention to the paneling. In more ways than one, these passages are much more akin to what Groensteen sees in non-figurative comics – since they »establish relationships of position, contiguity, intensity, repetition, variation, or contrast, as well as dynamic relationships of rhythm, interwovenness, etc« (2013, 12) – than his analysis of the aforementioned figurative, non-narrative Daniel Blancou comic. Ware blurs the lines between non-narrative and barely eventful comics.

In most of these series of images, Ware constructs interest akin to how other comics artists would create a narrative sequence, as they often depict characters doing things, passing time, but not necessarily narrative progression in a stricter sense. Nevertheless, the reader still follows these pages as easily as a more conventionally narrative comic, since a clear path and visual traction keeps them engaged. However, intrigue is not the goal of this path-like construction, but instead the visual relation between panels (even in a figurative, narrative comic), with the narrative aspect taking a secondary (if any) role in these passages. The absence of intrigue demands another source of progression. In this case, the paneling slows down the reading as much as the narrative progression, creating a feeling of boredom. This boredom is not a sign of absence of interest, but precisely what creates interest in these stories (see Schneider 2016).

Yet the visual aspect is only one possibility to create an interest in such a way as to fuel iconic solidarity instead of intrigue. Even in Ware's comic, visuality is accompanied by a sense of necessity that ties it to the poetic intent of both low eventfulness and more intrigued parts of his books: this sense of semantic unity is given by its theme. For most post-classical narratology, the theme is not a common topic, even though it was at the beginning of what we understand as narratology (see Tomachevski).

According to Tomachevski, the theme of a work of literature, its ›aboutness‹ (Eco 1979, 154), is what constitutes its unity and the source of the interest it creates in the reader. Thinking of it as more of an analytical tool, the theme should emerge from the reading as a hypothesis about what that work wants to say, and a general sense of its meaningfulness. For larger or serialized works, there could be several themes, with each part of a story having one, which converge on a larger theme at the end.

> The effect that a given theme will have on a reader is a significant consideration in its selection. By ›reader‹, we mean a rather indefinite group of persons; often a writer is not sure who will read his work. Nevertheless, the writer always considers the reader, at least abstractly, even if only to try to imagine himself in the reader's place. (Tomachevski, 180–181)

It is important to note that visual and thematic notions do not compete. Instead, non-narrative and non-figurative works often rely on thematic resonance to construct meaning. Shapes, tonality, lines, and uses of space are all resources that can communicate meaning,

as expressed by a theme. In comics, the theme appears as a way to give unity to a fragmented medium, to create a whole from its many parts, and to ascribe meaning, even (or especially) in situations in which there are very low levels of intrigue. This can be true for abstract comics, but also for figurative ones, and even for those in which low eventfulness presides. In such works, the way panels interact with each other is resonant in other ways, for instance by frame repetition, scene transitions, or minute changes in each panel instead of simple eventful progressions.

Our stress on the surfacing of visual and thematic interest in non-narrativity or low eventfulness in comics does not imply that this arrangement is specific, or even stronger in these particular instances of sequential art. Neither do we argue that these features only appear in passages with lower eventfulness. Such arrangements can surely be present in highly dramatic and intrigued passages in which, however, they work to maximize the intrigue of such stories instead of instituting a separate matrix of interest. The main interest in such instances, we insist, is still of a narrative order. Some interest must fuel iconic solidarity; and in the absence of narrative progression, something must fill this void, as these works continue to function as comics – and not just in the formal use of its apparatus, as the reader is drawn to read from one panel to the next.

Put simply, the more eventful a particular comic is, the more of its interest is fueled by intrigue and narrative progression, but if the eventfulness of the comic decreases, something other than intrigue must fill this space as the source of interest for iconic solidarity. As eventfulness gets lower and lower by decompression of the narrative and the increased spacing between or even exclusion of turning points, intrigue stops. As a result, other interests – including, but not limited to visual and thematic ones – can make the apparatus function properly. Therefore, this is not a question of a comic being either narrative or non-narrative, but of how much narrative there is, and how much space the other sources of interest need to occupy.

Three Examples From Brazil

Now we shall move on to take a closer look at some examples that illustrate these claims. We will analyze the work of three contemporary Brazilian cartoonists known for their comic strip series, namely, Laerte (Manual do Minotauro), Fábio Zimbres (Três Tiras Tristes), and Rafael Sica (untitled comic strip). Rather than focusing on eventful plots, disjunctive punch lines, recurrent characters, or recognizable story worlds, these authors explore graphic sequentiality by modulating temporalities and orchestrating our reading experience along with the panels. Low levels of eventfulness can open a space for other forms of visual, thematic, or poetic interest.

Fig. 1: Untitled strip. In: Manual do Minotauro.

Conventionally, the linear strip format works as a fitting capsule for the timing of a classic joke – usually structured as preparation, subversion, and punchline and provoking surprise from a sudden event that erupts from the ordinary. The internal mechanics of a gag involve unexpected conclusions, usually a compact event isolated in time (which normally is not prolonged but rapid). However, in our first example, the conclusion is absent, and we are left with a dangling question instead of a joke. The punchline – usually presenting the conclusive exclamation point – is replaced not by a ›cliff-hanger‹ introducing question marks about a future outcome but rather by open-ended suspension points. In the following strip (Figure 1), Laerte explores patterns of iteration to prolong time, proposing a brilliant game of reiteration to stress the notion of duration in the process of realizing things and achieving awareness.

The author proposes a visual contrast that indicates a comparison between the first three panels and the final one. The first three panels show the recurrence of the empty blank background so as to self-reflexively foreground comics conventions. The third blank panel opens a space of reflective indeterminacy and ambiguity that is only broken by the last panel, which reveals the background: a reality of dishwashing and domestic tasks, creating tension not through curiosity or suspense but through the very suspension of suspense that opens the strip up for duration and leaves the main characters in an absorptive state of inner reflection. Additionally, visual repetition is followed by textual recurrence of the same sentence (»certain things I perceive«) three times. Laerte addressed the nature of perception, first using a sensory verb (looking), then a quantitative one (tabulating). Finally (after a one-panel pause), realization occurs as something bounded in time and duration (»a long time later«).

What is at stake here is an approximation to the concept of poetry, especially in the way text and image are dismembered and segmented to modulate the pace and to distribute information spatially. What defines the genre of poetry is precisely the concept of segmentivity, or »the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying and combining segments« (Duplessis, 51). This segmentivity can also be applied to visual arts, including comics (see McHale 2010 and Surdiacourt), and might be helpful to explore fragmentation found

in sentences and panels breaking down, and in the games of assembling images that are not exclusively bounded by narrativity. »Comics, too, like poetry, are measured and countermeasured; they sound like chords of segments. And comics, also like poetry, elicit meaning in the place where meaning stalls out – in between, in the gutter« (McHale 2010, 46).

In our second example, Fábio Zimbres also explores the principle of iteration, but here, the sequence of anodyne mundane moments follows a logic that Barthes calls catalysis (1966, 8–11). The last of his *Three Sad Strips (Três Tiras Tristes)* is once again a tale of realization in time – a short episode about a man that goes out for a walk and realizes the economic scenery of the country has changed. The strip is divided into three same-sized panels that could be subdivided into two acts. A first ›scene‹ – broken down into two panels – shows the moment in which this everyday character crosses the street in an urban environment.

Although the strip presents very weak levels of narrativity, the material aspects provide a playground for the visual interest, as a series of graphic rhymes that keep calling our attention across the panels: first, we are invited to pay attention to the impression of stability of the main character, three times placed in the same position in the panel, holding the same neutral facial expression and same posture – frozen in mid-stride, looking ahead, indifferent. Besides that, the same perspective above eye level is sustained, as well as the similar graphic patterns and triangular shapes of the sidewalk and the hardwood floor. This example illustrates and reinforces how the iterative principle of comic art can be employed as a poetic program that uses graphic recurrences to bring up a feeling of sameness and highlight thematic moods of everyday life (Picado and Schneider 2020, 12).

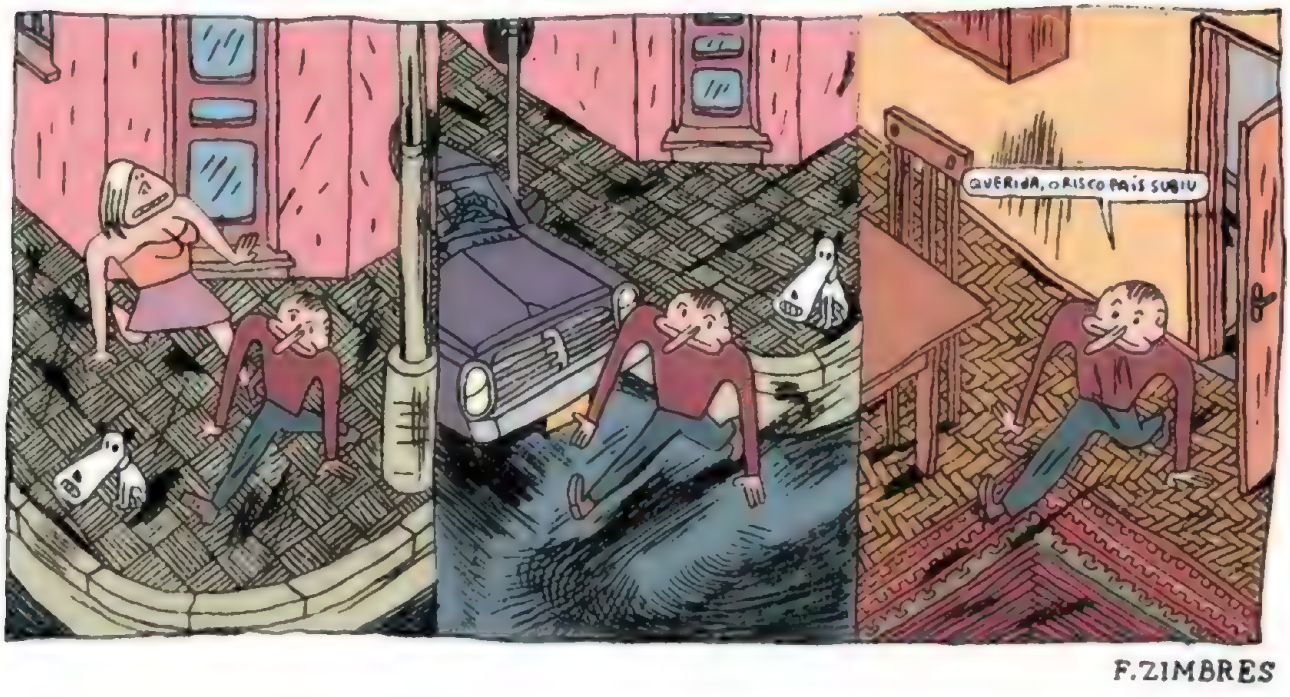

Fig. 2: Fábio Zimbres. Três tiras tristes. 2017. Three Sad Strips. [»Honey, the country risk rose«].

Our third and final example also deals with iteration in graphic form. But here it is the continuous pulse of enumeration that challenges narrative plotting. Sica's distancing of classic plots is part of a wider project in his career. In *FIM (Fácil e Ilustrado Manifesto)*, for example, the author describes the book as »narrative delusions and hallucinations with no beginning and end, meaningless, schizophrenic, enigmatic and beautiful« (Sica 2014). The book is marketed like this: »there is no order, there is no logical or intentional sense. There is no linear time running« (Sica 2014).

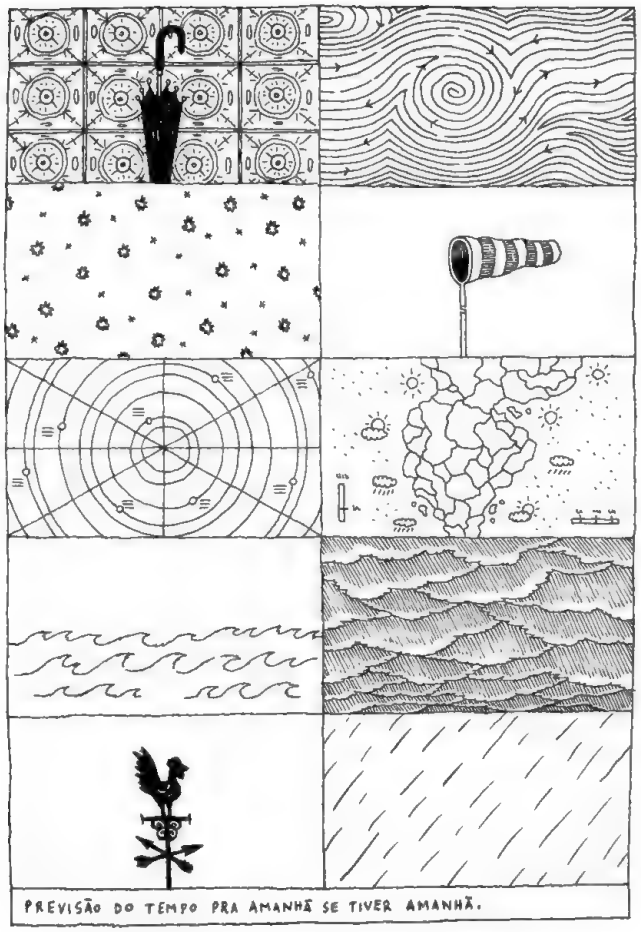

Fig. 3: Rafael Sica, 2018.

Rafael Sica has recently explored comics affordances to build a poetics of the inventory, gathering multiple items in one place/page. Using regular grids and repetitive page layouts, Sica transforms panels into containers, isolating centralized objects meticulously drawn against a white de-contextualized background. The co-presence of these containers and the tension between image and text provide the reading keys to fill the blanks, leaving the reader free to join the pieces, creating meaning through inferences and associations disentangled from narrative sequentiality. The double meaning of the concept of inventory is key here – it can refer both to the act of ingeniously discovering something new, but also to the act of shifting something dispersed (Pimentel, 27). As a basic form of distributing information in space, this poetics of the inventory is a movement frequently found in contemporary art.

The key here is the dominance of tabularity (Fresnault-Deruelle, 7–23), a spatial mode that involves a synoptic regime of reading to make meaning out of the elements dispersed on the page. In this specific example, Sica shows a collection of ten panels. At first sight, the reader is moved by graphic aspects of the visual trace – visual rhymes, like dots, lines, and shapes, vertical or horizontal lines, crowded or empty panels. It is not the linear logic of succession that moves our attention here. Furthermore, the caption placed at the bottom of the page just indicates the key to an inferential reading, functioning as relay (see Barthes, 1964): a weather forecast for tomorrow if there is a tomorrow. This *relay* is key to reading these

elements as both an everyday banal occurrence (just another recurrent weather forecast) and as a highly eventful prospect (the unique possibility of not having a ›tomorrow‹). This ambiguity of different readings of frequency is very typical of comics:

> In comics, all cases of singulative, repetitive, and iterative, and their various combinations, are equally possible. Yet, what is specifically challenging to the analysis of narrative frequency in this medium is that we need to take into consideration repetition at various levels of representation: the images, the layout, visual style, the words, and their interaction (Mikkonen, 61).

Depending on how one decides to assemble these pieces, the co-presence of clouds, winds, waves, stars, windsocks, and umbrellas could be read as what Genette calls iterative narrative events (Genette, 111–126), telling once something that is routinely repeated. But the elements can also be read as simultaneous or presented at the same time, denoting an ungraspable scale of change. That is the tension. The forces that rule the principle of iconic solidarity can differ in nature – the juxtaposition of images displayed in panels can be arranged in sequence, but they can also cohabit in the same space – mixing sequential and synoptical views, linearity and tabularity.

These three cases provide examples of a »poetics of reticence, ambiguity, and indeterminacy« (Groensteen 2013, 30) and reveal how the comics format is convenient to exercise this type of information architecture, suggesting other forms to explore the page layout that moves away from sequentiality and plot structure. Although all three examples share low levels of eventfulness, the difficulty of finding an evident plot, and a frail narrative tension, this does not necessarily imply the absence of narrativity, but reveals how the dominant forces that move our interest as comics readers can be found elsewhere, for example, in thematic meaning-making, and plastic forms of visual and verbal representation.

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Table of Figures

Fig.1: Laerte. Untitled comic strip. In: Manual do Minotauro.

Fig. 2: Zimbres, Fábio: Três tiras tristes. Three Sad Strips. 2017 ["Honey, the country risk rose"].

Fig. 3: Sica, Rafael: Untitled comic strip, published on the cartoonist's facebook page.

1] We shall analyze Brazilian artists Laerte Coutinho, Rafael Sica, and Fábio Zimbres, considering some of the (possibly narrative) modulations preserved in their styles which illustrate a process of attenuation of more resolute eventfulness.

2] This idea of a *narrative transcendence* of comics somehow coincides with how film studies had previously consecrated the departing point of an assumed essence of cinema, conceived as a narrative spectacle. Both in Gilles Deleuze's adventures in the temporal regimes of filmic perception and David Bordwell's versions of such criticism, in which film narrativity is only a subset of an entire poetics of film, there have been counter-discourses to such narrative imperatives.

3] We are here referring to the terms of the CFP for the Thematic Session ‹Non-Narrative Comics›, in: https://www.comicgesellschaft.de/en/2020/09/18/cfp-closure-open-section-thematic-section-non-narrative-comics/

4] The notion of ›eventfulness‹ is especially appropriate to typify the discursive agencies in which events of a story are particularly structured in narratives: generically, it is a question of defining the reference to states of affairs manifested as changes, accidents, deviations – as well as the fact that their emergence on the plane of history does not involve necessity. As a narrative configuration, the occurrence of eventfulness equally involves the cultural codes inscribed in the discursive representation of actions (see Hühn 2013).

5] Functions of the juxtaposition of drawings within a multiframe that doesn't necessarily lead to a narrative.

6] »A series is a succession of continuous or discontinuous images linked by a system of iconic, plastic or semantic correspondences. [...] A sequence is a succession of images where the syntagmic linking is determined by a narrative project« (Groensteen 2009, 146).

CLOSURE
Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung

Quasi-Figuren

Im Grenzbereich der Körperlichkeit

Thierry Groensteen

In jeder Erzählung passiert jemandem etwas. Dieser Jemand wird *Figur* genannt. Von jeher haben Erzähler_innen, Drehbuchautor_innen und Romanciers_ières die Figur als treibende Kraft der Erzählung betrachtet, diejenige, ohne die es *keine mögliche Erzählung gäbe*.

Françoise Lavocat beobachtet dennoch, dass die schriftlich orientierte Kultur unlängst »eine gewisse Herablassung«[1] an den Tag legt in Bezug auf »den spielerischen, affektiven, imaginativen Gebrauch«, den einige Leser_innen von fiktionalen Figuren machen – eine Einstellung, die ausgedient hat in der Stunde des Triumphs der *pop culture* und der »Aufregung um die neuen kollektiven Praktiken der Fiktion – Fan-Fiction, virtuelle Welten, *Cosplay* – «[2].

Ob im Roman, im Kino, im Fernsehen oder im Comic, die Figur ist für gewöhnlich das Resultat einer Ausarbeitung, die aus Prozessen physischer, sozialer und moralischer Charakterisierungen besteht. Weil ihr eine Gesamtheit an Zuschreibungen und Qualitäten gegeben ist, kann sie, in den Augen der Öffentlichkeit, eine *Person* darstellen, und wie eines der »experimentellen Egos«[3] funktionieren, von welchen Milan Kundera spricht, anhand derer »der Autor über experimentelle Ichs (Figuren) einigen großen Themen der Existenz auf den Grund geht« (Kundera 2007, 178).

Es ist entscheidend, so schreibt Vincent Jouve, dass die Figur uns glauben lässt, sie existiere auch außerhalb des Papiers. Auch Jean-Marie Schaeffer besteht darauf: »die Projektion, die uns dazu bringt, die [Figur] *wie* eine Person zu behandeln, ist essentiell für das Erschaffen und die Rezeption von Erzählungen«[4]. Das ist es, was man die *Referenzillusion* nennt.

Es handelt sich tatsächlich um eine Illusion, denn offensichtlich sind die fiktionalen Wesen nicht mehr als das, was Étienne Souriau »fürsorgebedürftig« (130) nennt, was bedeutet, dass sie eigentlich außerhalb der Aufmerksamkeit, die wir ihnen schenken, nicht existieren.

Diese Illusion entsteht in der Literatur und im Comic, in denen man auf ein einfaches ›Wesen aus Papier‹ trifft, sicher nicht auf dieselbe Weise wie auf der Bühne oder auf dem Bildschirm, wo man es mit einer Figur aus Fleisch und Blut zu tun bekommt, verkörpert durch die Schauspieler_innen. Dennoch ist es bemerkenswert, dass die fehlende Fleischwerdung der Figur keinesfalls bedeutet, dass die Illusion nicht entsteht: die Leser_innen können sich leidenschaftlich für das Schicksal von Anna Karenina begeistern, genauso wie für das von Mike S. Blueberry, Verlangen nach Salammbô empfinden genauso wie Mitleid für Charlie Brown. Das rührt daher, dass die Figur vor allem eine Konstruktion des Textes und des Plots ist. Wir sehen sie in Situationen verstrickt, die unsere Sympathie wecken, und sehen sie mit anderen Figuren interagieren, die als ›Entwickler_innen‹ dienen. Auf diese Weise projizieren wir dieselben Gefühle auf sie, die auch eine reale Person in uns auslösen kann.

Wir haben bis hierher den traditionellen Blick auf die Figur zusammengefasst, der einem intuitiven Umgang mit den Erzählern genauso wie den Rezipienten von Geschichten entspricht. Allerdings wurde dieser Ansatz in Frage gestellt. So war für den ›nouveau Romancier‹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, die Figur nicht mehr das Äquivalent einer Person, sondern vielmehr eine Funktion. Er berief sich dabei auf die strukturalistischen Erzähltheorien, die nach Vladimir Propp abstrakte Kategorien von *Aktanten* unterscheiden.

Vor mittlerweile doch recht langer Zeit dachte Aristoteles darüber nach, dass die Idee der Figur sekundär sei im Vergleich mit der der Handlung und jene dieser unterstellt sein müsse. Seine Poetik erklärt, dass es Geschichten geben kann ohne Charaktere, aber keinen Charakter ohne Geschichte.

Nach Robert Scholes, James Phelan und Robert Kellogg heben die ›höheren‹ Werke der modernen Literatur die Figur hervor (angereichert mit dem Erbe der Freud'schen Psychologie), während die ›niederen‹ Genres (zum Beispiel der Abenteuerroman) der Handlung den Vorrang gewähren (Scholes/Phelan/Kellogg, 237).

Wenn man sich dieser Unterscheidung anschließt, hätte der Comic, der ja sehr lange Zeit von der Abenteuergeschichte in all ihren Facetten dominiert war, also die Handlung bevorzugt, während in jüngster Zeit die Figur wieder zu ihrem vollen Recht gekommen sei, dank des Aufschwungs von Autorencomics, die oft das innere Abenteuer in den Vordergrund stellen. »Die Tatsache, dass er sich in den Fußstapfen des ›realistischen und psychologischen Romans‹ sowie der Bekenntnisliteratur bewegt, ist zweifellos einer der Gründe dafür, dass der Comic, der in diesem Zuge mit dem Eskapismus brach, an Ansehen gewinnen konnte.«[5]

Wenn ein und dieselbe Figur über die Jahre hinweg eine lange Reihe von Abenteuern erlebt, kann sie sich zahlreiche Charakterzüge zulegen und erlangt schrittweise eine unbestreitbar reiche Persönlichkeit. Ich denke hier im Besonderen an Kapitän Haddock, ein *experimentelles Ego*, das aus einem besonders reichhaltigen ›menschlichen Knetmasse‹ gemacht zu sein scheint.

Auf der Suche nach etwas, das charakteristisch für die gezeichnete Figur ist, kommt einem als erstes in den Sinn, dass sie nicht trennbar ist von ihrem *Design* – oder, wenn man lieber möchte, ihrer grafischen Kodierung. Wäre sie anders gezeichnet, wäre sie nicht mehr dieselbe. Jean-Christophe Menu merkte apropos der Figur, die ihn in seinen autobiografischen Comics repräsentiert, an: »Es sind der Strich und der Stil, die in der Lage sind, diesem ›Ich aus Papier‹ Konsistenz zu verleihen, und nicht die Ähnlichkeit. […] Ist mein Strich mein eigentlicher Körper?«[6] Im Grunde kann man, bei ähnlichen Bedingungen, genau dies über jede gezeichnete Figur sagen: Ihr Strich ist ihr wirklicher Körper.

Wenn eine Figur Anklang findet, schreibe ich im Übrigen den Erfolg zu ungefähr gleichen Teilen ihren persönlichen Qualitäten und dem Vermögen des_der Zeichnenden zu. Haddock, da wir gerade von ihm sprachen, ist sicher eine anziehende Figur, aber seine Menschlichkeit schuldet er dem Genie von Hergé, der fähig war, seinem Gesicht eine unendliche Anzahl von Ausdrucksnuancen zu geben, und das mit nur einer kleinen Anzahl minimalistischer grafischer Zeichen. Gleichermaßen ist die physische Verführung, die ich beispielsweise bei einer femininen Figur finden kann, auch ambivalent: Wenn ich Chihuahua Pearl anziehend finde (oder Natacha oder Colombe Tiredaille oder Pelisse – setzen Sie hier den Namen der Ihrer Meinung nach verführerischsten Heldin ein), bedeutet dies auf der einen Seite, dass die Figur mich anzieht, und auf der anderen Seite, dass Giraud (oder Walthéry oder Dany oder Loisel …) sehr gut Frauen zeichnen kann. Die fleischliche Hülle besteht gleichzeitig aus einer Silhouette und dem Strich. Eine *gelungene* fiktive Figur ist eine, an die man sich erinnert. Wenn meine Erinnerung eine gezeichnete Figur heraufbeschwört, die mir gefallen, mich interessiert, gar fasziniert hat, ist das mentale Bild, das sich formt, das einer Zeichnung.

Oder, wenn alle Figuren, die die Comics bevölkern, gleichermaßen aus ›menschlicher Knetmasse‹ und Zeichnung gemacht sind, gibt es wiederum einige, die hauptsächlich aus Zeichnung bestehen, was heißt, sie sind der vielen Eigenschaften beraubt, die gewöhnlich aus einer Figur ein *experimentelles Ego* machen. Im Folgenden werde ich auf einige Beispiele dieser ›Quasi-Figuren‹ eingehen.

Es gibt zunächst die Kategorie der ›winzig Kleinen‹. Seine Figur so zu miniaturisieren, dass sie eine Größe von weniger als 1 cm hat, stellt einen Distanzierungsprozess dar und verpflichtet zur grafischen Vereinfachung. Dies ist ein Gestus, der aus dem Willen zum Minimalismus heraus entsteht. Im Niederländischen heißen die kleinen Wesen, mit denen sich die Zeichnerin Maaike Hartjes selbst darstellt, ›krabbels‹, ein Wort, das gleichzeitig Handzeichnung und Gekritzel bedeutet (Abb. 1). Hartjes ist 1972 geboren und wurde bekannt durch eine Serie autobiografischer Mini-Comics, veröffentlicht unter dem Gesamttitel *Maaike's Dagboekje* (Maaikes Tagebüchlein). ›Dagboek*je*‹ statt ›Dagboek‹ (Hart*jes*, ›Herz*chen*‹): die Diminutive scheinen die Miniaturdimension ihrer kleinen grafischen Welt sogar noch zu unterstreichen.

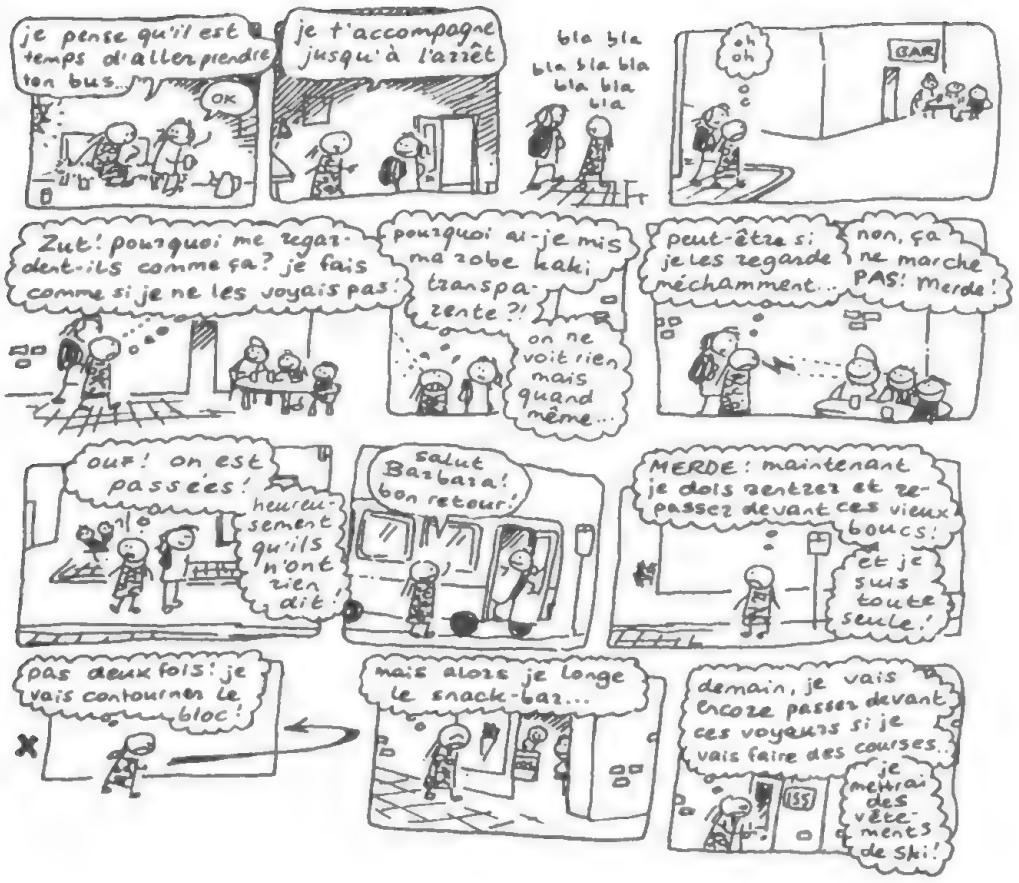
je pense qu'il est temps d'aller prendre ton bus
OK
je t'accompagne jusqu'à l'arrêt
bla bla bla bla bla bla bla bla
oh oh
BAR
Zut! pourquoi me regardent-ils comme ça? je fais comme si je ne les voyais pas
pourquoi ai-je mis ma robe kaki transparente?!
on ne voit rien mais quand même...
peut-être si je les regarde méchamment...
non, ça ne marche PAS! Merde!
ouf! on est passées! heureusement qu'ils n'ont rien dit!
salut Barbara! bon retour!
MERDE: maintenant je dois rentrer et repasser devant ces vieux boucs! et je suis toute seule!
pas deux fois! je vais contourner le bloc!
mais alors je longe le snack-bar...
demain, je vais encore passer devant ces voyeurs si je vais faire des courses... je mettrai des vêtements de ski!

Abb. 1: Maaike Hartjes: Mon Journal. Paris: La Cafetière, 1999, o. S.

Vor allem veröffentlicht im alternativen Comic-Magazin *Zone 5300*, im Frauenmagazin *Viva* und in der Tageszeitung *NRC*, bewegte sich die Zeichnerin weg von einer simplen Chronik ihres Alltags hin zu ernsteren Themen. Sie berichtet von ihrer Auseinandersetzung mit der Apartheid in Südafrika und ihrem plötzlichen Burnout Ende 2014 (Hartjes 2018). In diesem Werk drückt sie ihre Erschöpfung aus, ihre Verzweiflung, ihre Panikattacken, und integriert auf ihren Seiten Fotos von Briefumschlägen, Post-Its, Bustickets, und andere Papierfetzen aller Art.

Hartjes ist durchaus fähig, auf andere Art als in *krabbels* zu zeichnen: In einem realistischen Stil hat sie eine epische Fantasyerzählung mit dem Titel *Lyla* veröffentlicht. Zwei Dinge können hier also festgehalten werden – zunächst der Umstand, dass sie ihrem winzigen Alter Ego die Aufgabe anvertraut hat, sehr persönliche, düstere und schmerzhafte Situationen auszudrücken, was beweist, dass sie ihm die Wirkmächtigkeit einer Figur voll und ganz zuschreibt. Außerdem, dass sie dachte, der minimalistische grafische Stil sei nicht inkompatibel mit einem sehr viel elaborierterem materiellen und sensorischen Aufwand.

Kommen wir zum ersten dieser beiden Punkte zurück. Wir erinnern uns vielleicht an die Meditation von Ernst Gombrich über das Kind, das sich auf einen Besenstiel setzt oder irgendeinen anderen Stock und diesen als Holzpferd benutzt: »Der Stecken ist weder ein Zeichen, das den Begriff des Pferdes symbolisiert, noch das Porträt eines bestimmten Pferdes. Dank seiner Fähigkeit, für ein Pferd einstehen zu können, wird er selbst zum Pferd« (Gombrich, 19). Auf dieselbe Weise, auf die der Besen alle Charaktereigenschaften eines Pferdes bekommt, weil er den gleichen Gebrauchswert in einer besonderen Logik, nämlich der des Spiels, hat, zeigt sich ein *krabbel* als ein überzeugender Ersatz für eine Person in einer anderen Logik, anders als die des Spiels und doch ähnlich, die Logik der Erzählung. Mit einem Kreis für den Kopf (und darin zwei Punkte für die Augen, eine Linie für den Mund), einem Rechteck für den Körper und kleinen Strichen, die die vier Gliedmaßen darstellen, behalten die *Minuskeln* von Hartjes ein wiedererkennbares Körperschema bei; sie ähneln tatsächlich reduzierten Kinderzeichnungen.

La Petite Personne [die kleine Person, Anm. d. Übs.] (1994) von Perrine Rouillon ist auch von kleiner Größe, aber sie hat keine menschliche Figur, außer der Kugel, die den Kopf symbolisiert (Abb. 2). Nach den Worten der Autorin ist sie eine »kleine um sich selbst gewickelte Kugel«[7], eine »Art Ideogramm des Ich«[8]. Die kleine Person monologisiert oder ist im Dialog mit anderen *Minuskeln*, die kaum weiter ausgearbeitet werden als sie selbst, auf Seiten ohne Panels oder Hintergrund, auf denen die Leere dominiert. Wenn Rouillon vom Bereich der Wörter in den der Handlung wechselt und eine Geste zeichnet, sieht man, wie ein Arm sich bewegt, ein Bein, und in diesem *krabbel* wird eine menschliche Form, das heißt ein Körper, kenntlich. Von *La Petite Personne* über *Moi et les autres petites personnes on voudrait savoir pourquoi on n'est pas dans le livre* (2016), *Mona-Mie, la petite personne* (1997), *Le Diable, l'amoureux et la photocopine* (1999) und *La Petite Personne et la Mort* (2003) bis zu *L'Abécédaire de la Petite Personne* (2008) bleibt Rouillon, seit dem Jahr ihrer Erfindung 1970, der kleinen Kreatur aus Tinte treu, aus der sie eine Verlängerung von sich selbst gemacht hat.

Abb. 2: Perrine Rouillon: La Petite Personne et la Mort. Paris: Seuil, 2003, o. S.

Die umliegenden Worte, die mit dem Schweigen der kleinen Person in Austausch treten, sind es, die hier zählen, mehr als die Zeichnung. Die kleine Person und ihre Gesprächspartner_innen sind vor allem Sprecher_innen, verwickelt in witzige, existenzielle, sogar metaphysische Dialoge. Durch sie vermittelt die Autorin ihr eigenes Denken, sich vorantastend, unentschieden, und bahnt sich einen Weg zu »ihrem intimsten Ich«[9]. Diese letzten Worte stammen von Benoît Jahan, der erkannt hat, was wir eigentlich sind im Angesicht einer »Schrift, die sich zugleich sehen und lesen lässt«[10].

Die letzten *Minuskeln*, die wir uns anschauen, tauchen in den Comicalben von Lewis Trondheim *Mister O* und *Mister i* auf. Ist es ein Zufall, dass das Akronym der beiden Titel uns die Buchstaben für die Wörter *Mimo* (wie um anzuzeigen, dass die beiden Bücher, die Pantomime wieder aufleben lassen) und *Moi* [Ich/Mich, Anm. d. Übs.] liefert? Zunächst sind in diesen beiden Werken, noch vor den Figuren, bereits die Panels miniaturisiert. Wenn die Maße eines gewöhnlichen Panels mehr oder weniger dem optischen Bereich entsprechen, den der Blick auf einer Seite aus einer Distanz von 30 Zentimetern erfassen kann, und wenn sie genügen, um ein *Analogon* zu erzeugen, die Imitation eines Ausschnitts aus der Welt, dann hat man es hier mit etwas zu tun, das mit dem *thimble theatre* [›thimble‹: Fingerhut, Anm. d. Übs.] verwandt sein könnte – um den Originaltitel der Serie aufzugreifen, in der Popeye das Licht der Welt erblickte, ein ›Fingerhuttheater‹. Diese unkonventionelle und spielerische Verwendung der Codes markiert eine Entwicklung in der Unterhaltungsliteratur. Die Umgebung wird auf fast nichts reduziert, die Handlung genauso. Auch die Figur hat kaum noch eine tatsächlich menschliche Erscheinungsform. Wie die Namen schon erkennen lassen, ist Mister O ein Kreis und Mister i ein länglicher Stab, eine Art Frankfurter Würstchen. Ganz gleich um welches Piktogramm es sich handelt, immer reichen zwei Punkte für die Augen und einige Striche für den Mund und die vier Gliedmaßen, um einer Zeichnung Leben einzuhauchen. Indem sie stumm bleiben, werden sie der Realität noch ein wenig mehr entrückt. Sie verkörpern etwas Lebendiges, doch sie können nicht länger als Ersatz für irgendetwas herhalten. Die einfachen und repetitiven Handlungen, denen sie sich hingeben, machen aus ihnen vielmehr Zahnrädchen in einem Mechanismus. Mister O will eine Art enge Schlucht überwinden, einen vertikalen Spalt, deren Form ungefähr die eines großen I ist. Mister i will nach einer Torte grapschen, in Form eines O. Beide scheinen also besessen zu sein von ihrem Gegenteil.

Den Gipfel der Miniaturisierung findet man bei dem Quebecer Shane Simmons und seinem experimentellen Comic *The Long and Unlearned Life of Roland Gethers*[11]. 3840 Panels (160 pro Seite) zählt diese Erzählung – und eine Erzählung ist es tatsächlich, die umfangreich und ambitioniert die komplette, 89 Jahre lange Lebensgeschichte des Protagonisten erzählt und dabei mehrere unterschiedliche Orte, Epochen, drei Kriege und eine Vielzahl an Personen umfasst –, und jedes dieser Panels besteht aus nichts weiter als einfachen Punkten. Es handelt sich also hier nicht um einen *long shot*, wie der Untertitel schelmisch andeutet,

sondern einen *extreme long shot* (eine Sichtweise von sehr weit weg), bei dem jede Handlung aus einer so großen Entfernung beobachtet wird, dass die Figuren fast unsichtbar sind. Auf der Rückseite des Buches heißt es, die Bilder bestünden eigentlich aus durch photokopieren reduzierten Gravuren viktorianischen Ursprungs. Dies taucht das Ganze in ein augenzwinkerndes Licht und macht es unmöglich, die Frage zu beantworten: Sind es die Figuren, die man nicht mehr unterscheiden kann, oder ihre Darstellung?

Reductio ad absurdum? Diese Worte müssen hier wörtlich genommen und nicht wie sonst üblich verstanden werden als ›Beweis durch Widerspruch‹. Obwohl … Es steckt sehr wohl etwas Absurdes in der Tatsache, einen Text in die Kategorie Comic aufnehmen zu wollen, der, alles zusammengenommen, nicht mehr ist als ein dramatischer Text, eine Folge dialogischer Szenen (mit mehreren wiedererkennbaren Stimmen, und spielerischen Veränderungen bei Größe und Schreibart der Buchstaben), jedoch ohne erzählende Bilder. Warum aber fordert Simmons für sein Werk diesen Status ein? Die Antwort ist, meines Erachtens, dass die Bilder hier durch die Leser_in produziert werden. Eine Kugel oder ein Stab behindern das Imaginative; es geht nichts über einen Punkt, wenn man dem Imaginativen größtmöglichen Spielraum ermöglichen will.

Wenn wir ein literarisches Werk lesen, kann es vorkommen, dass in unserem Geist Bilder entstehen. Dies ist der Grund, erklärt Paul Auster, »warum jeder einzelne Leser eines Romans ein anderes Buch liest als jeder andere Leser dieses Romans. Man ist aktiv beteiligt, und jeder Kopf produziert ständig seine eigenen Bilder« (Auster/Coetzee, 22. Oktober 2010). Die mentalen Bilder, die wir malen, während wir Simmons lesen, sind dementsprechend auch persönlich. Aber sicher ist, dass die Tatsache, dass er seiner Erzählung die Form des Comics gegeben hat und dabei die Funktionsweise dieser aus Kästchen geformten Maschinerie, die »secondary machinery« (189) der neunten Kunst, um den Begriff von Kirk Varnedoe und Adam Gopnik zu verwenden, sein »rohes Skelett«[12], um es mit den Worten Menus zu sagen, respektiert hat, uns nur umso mehr zum folgenden Akt der Visualisierung motiviert: Im Geiste fügen wir die fehlenden Bilder hinzu, dem Impuls der vielen Frames folgend, durch die eine Matrixdimension entsteht, »abgebildet und abbildend«[13] – Begriffe, die in diesem Fall von Henri Van Lier stammen.

Ein Comic ohne Bild, ja, das kann existieren. Von all den Versuchen, die in diese Richtung bereits unternommen wurden, bleibt, nach unserem Wissen, derjenige von François Ayroles, *Feinte Trinité* genannt, der geschmackvollste (Abb. 3). Er besteht aus 45 Panels, jeweils in Gruppen von drei, sechs oder neun angeordnet (in OuBaPo 2003). Die ›Maschinerie‹ des Comics ist hier vollständiger, oder dem herrschenden Gebrauch besser angepasst, denn die Dialoge schreiben sich wie von selbst in die Sprechblasen, deren perfekte Rundung sich dialektisch der quadratischen Form der Panels entgegenstellt. Es gibt vier (unsichtbare) Figuren: eine Mutter, ein Vater, ihr Sohn und Gott. Die Sprechblasen sagen

nichts aus, sondern zeigen jeweils auf eines der vier Gesichter im Panel: Das Kind unten, die Mutter auf der einen, der Vater auf der anderen Seite und Gott oben. Der extremen Entfernung oder Verkleinerung, die Simmons praktiziert, setzt Ayroles eine andere Prozedur des Verschwindens entgegen: die Beibehaltung des nicht-sichtbaren Raums.

Aber kann man hier von Figuren sprechen? Müsste man sie nicht einfach als Sprecher_innen bezeichnen?

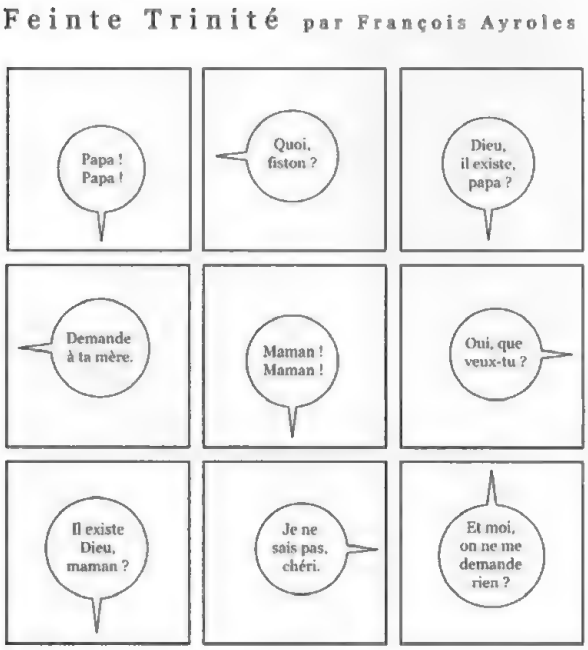
Feinte Trinité par François Ayroles
Papa ! Papa !
Quoi, fiston ?
Dieu, il existe, papa ?
Demande à ta mère.
Maman ! Maman !
Oui, que veux-tu ?
Il existe Dieu, maman ?
Je ne sais pas, chéri.
Et moi, on ne me demande rien ?

Abb. 3: François Ayroles: Feinte Trinité. In: OuBaPo: Oupus 2. Paris: L'Association, 2003, 24.

In einer Fiktion existieren Figuren nur mittels ihrer Dialoge, ihrer Interaktionen. Zusammen bilden sie eine emotionale und dynamische Konstellation, was bedeutet, ihre gegenseitigen Gefühle entwickeln sich im Laufe der Geschichte. In dem hier vorliegenden Fall spielen sich die Interaktionen einzig auf der verbalen Ebene ab. Aber wir müssen anerkennen, dass *Reden* eine Form des *Handelns* ist. Bei Schriftstellern wie Racine oder Marivaux steht das Wort im Zentrum der Theaterhandlung und verschmilzt fast komplett mit dieser. Fragen, widersprechen, Dinge erörtern, lügen, befehlen, spotten, verurteilen … sind ebenfalls allesamt Modalitäten einer Sprechhandlung. In diesem Sinne sind die unsichtbaren Sprecher_innen von Ayroles auch literarische Figuren. Wie man von manchen Tieren sagt, ›sie müssten nur noch sprechen können‹, würde man in Bezug auf Ayroles Sprecher_innen sagen, dass ihnen nur noch die körperliche Hülle fehlt.

Die letzten Panels aus *Feinte Trinité* sind natürlich ein raffiniertes Augenzwinkern: Gott ist erstaunt, dass seine drei irdischen Sprecher_innen verschwunden sind … obwohl wir ja wissen, dass sie eigentlich niemals ganz erschienen sind.

In seinem gesamten (mehr als 40 Titel umfassenden, bis 1995 zurückreichenden) Werk, behält der in Liège lebende Zeichner José Parrondo einen minimalistischen Stil bei. Seine schematischen Figuren eignen sich, je nach Anlass, für humoristische, poetische oder metaphysische Zwecke. In seinem jüngsten Werk *I Am The Eggman* gibt sich der Protagonist eiförmig. Er hat Augen, zwei kurze Beine und Arme, die jedoch nur zu sehen sind, wenn er sie braucht, für eine Geste etwa, oder eine Handlung. Über die *Lettre électronique* [Newsletter, Anm. d. Übs.] des Verlags l'Association (von Februar 2021) kommentiert der Autor

dies wie folgt: »Das Ei ist die Grundform, die am einfachsten zu zeichnende Form. Ich greife für meine Figuren immer auf einfache Formen zurück, und es ist nicht das erste Mal, dass ich ein Eiermännchen zeichne. Bolas Bug, eine Figur meiner ersten Bücher bei den Verlagen Rouergue und l'Association, war auch eines. Außer dass Bolas Bug eine Nase hat, einen Mund und eine Krawatte, Dinge, die Eggman entbehren könnte. Eine Krawatte für Eggman?, Nein, sicher nicht, er trägt nichts außer seine Eierschale, das reicht ihm vollkommen. Und auch kein Mund, er braucht ihn nicht: Er lebt in einer stummen Welt«[14].

Ein unvollständiges Körperschema, ein Entzug der Sprache: es scheint erneut so, dass man es hier mit einem Grenzbereich der Figur zu tun hat, einem verstümmelten Wesen, nicht vollendet, deren Handlungsmöglichkeiten begrenzt sind. Oder, wie es Thomas Bernard in seinem auf der Seite *ActuaBD* erschienenen Bericht formuliert hat: »das Faszinierende an *I Am The Eggman* ist das komische Gefühl, etwas zu betrachten, das, weit davon entfernt lebendig zu sein, dem Leben sehr nahe scheint. Direkt vor seiner Nase ein autonomes Ökosystem sich entfalten zu sehen, erst im Verlauf der Seiten und dann nach dem Ende der Lektüre in unserer Vorstellung …«[15]

Die sich auf etwas beziehende Illusion hat hier ausgedient. Wir merken deutlich, dass wir es mit einem ›Wesen‹ zu tun haben, das nichts anderes mehr sein will als eine Zeichnung. Kann dieses Wesen mit seiner rudimentären Erscheinungsform trotzdem noch so tun, als sei es eine Figur? Auf eine gewisse Weise ja, denn es macht uns zu den Zeug_innen seiner Handlungen, seinem Erstaunen, der Schwierigkeiten, auf die es trifft. Seine aufgerissenen Augen verleihen ihm eine unleugbare Ausdruckskraft, vor allem da sie mit regelmäßigen Abständen auf unsere Augen gerichtet sind, und wir uns auf diese Weise angesprochen fühlen. Philippe Marion und Chantale Anciaux beobachteten unlängst, dass »im klassischen Spielfilm der direkte Blick eines Schauspielers in die Kamera extrem selten ist: er wird generell als plötzlicher Riss im fiktionalen Gewebe erachtet«[16]. Im Comic hingegen ist diese Zuwendung kein Tabu. Und, wie man bei Gotlib deutlich sieht, gebräuchlich bis übertrieben.

Die Welt, in der Eggman entsteht, ist eine Welt grafischen Ursprungs. Parrondo spielt ohne Unterlass mit den verschiedenen Kodierungen des Zeichnens, mit illusionären Perspektiven, Brüchen im Maßstab und unzähligen anderen selbstreflexiven Kniffen. Diese Spiele erzeugen Situationen, die sich als kompletter Nonsens entpuppen würden, bezöge man sie auf unsere Erfahrungswelt, auf unsere Umgebung. Aber Eggman entwickelt sich in einer Welt, die die seine ist, eine Welt ohne Linien auf dem Papier, eine Welt grafischer Poesie, in der andere Gesetze gelten und die Logik, an die gewohnt sind, nicht funktioniert.

Dies bedeutet, dass wir durch Eggman ein Paralleluniversum entdecken, in dem Eggman nicht nur wichtigster Bewohner, sondern auch dessen Botschafter bei uns ist. Auf diese Weise können wir Eggman eine anthropologische Dimension nicht absprechen: Was wir sehen, *dokumentiert*, wie es ist, in jenem Universum zu leben.

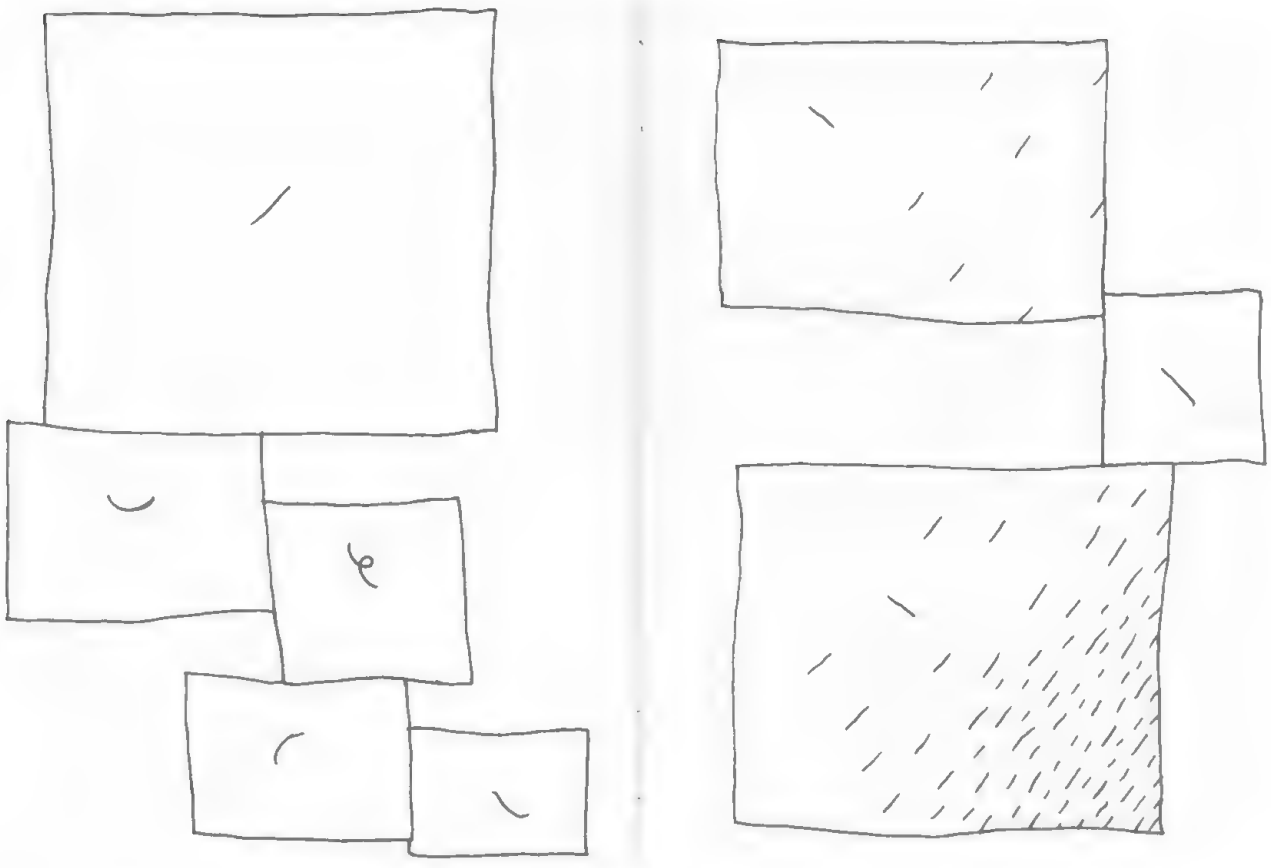

Abb. 4: Alex Baladi: Petit Trait: Paris: L'Association, 2008, o. S.

Suchen wir eine_n Zeichner_in, die sogar noch weiter gegangen ist als Parrondo bei der Schöpfung einer Welt purer Zeichnung ohne jede anthropomorphe Referenz, stoßen wir auf Alex Baladi und sein Mini-Comicalbum *Petit Trait* [Kleiner Strich, Anm. d. Übs.] (Abb. 4). Dieser Comic zeigt, dass ein einziger Strich, eine Form, eine Farbe, ein grafisches Objekt gleich welcher Art selbst ›Abenteuer‹ erleben kann, wie es Menu nahegelegt hat (10f.). Die *histoire*, die erzählt wird, ist demnach die der Transformationen, die jenes Objekt in einer physischen Welt, in der ein Bild das nächste gebiert, durchmacht. Im vorliegenden Fall betritt der ›kleine Strich‹ das Feld, verrenkt sich, rollt sich ein, schlängelt oder vervielfältigt sich, transformiert sich in einen ganzen Strauß ähnlicher Striche, die zu einer Schraffur werden und sich in einem Kraftfeld zu bewegen scheinen, und so fort. *I am the Eggman* könnte also theoretisch auch *Ich bin ein kleiner Strich* heißen, genauso wie *Bleu* [Blau, Anm. d. Übs.] von Trondheim, genauso gut den Titel *Ich bin ein Farbklecks* hätte tragen können.

In diesem Fall scheint es nicht möglich zu sein, den kleinen Strich von Baladi eine literarische Figur zu nennen, außer im metaphorischen Sinne. Wir können von Panel zu Panel nicht einmal sicher sein, ob wir überhaupt immer denselben Strich bei seinen Metamorphosen und Wendungen verfolgen. Scheint es nicht vielmehr immer wieder ein neuer Strich

zu sein? Und ist nicht sogar das Besondere an jeder gezeichneten Erzählung, dass sie mit jedem neuen Abschnitt auch ein neues Ensemble von Strichen zusammenstellen kann? Rein faktisch gesehen kann ein Strich nicht wiederholt werden, sondern wird jedes Mal neu erschaffen. Man kann ihm daher nur erlebte Abenteuer zuschreiben, wenn man ihm vorher bereitwillig die Funktion des Aktanten zugeschrieben hat, die die Möglichkeit einer Perspektivänderung impliziert, wodurch der Strich schließlich zur grafischen Spur und zur selben Zeit zur Darstellung dieser Spur würde.

Widmen wir uns hier einem Einschub. Es gibt alle möglichen Arten von Handbüchern oder auch Webseiten, die erklären, wie man eine Figur zeichnet. Meist wird geraten, dass man damit beginnen soll, ein Strichmännchen zu zeichnen, ausgehend von einer schematischen Vorlage, um dieses dann Schritt für Schritt auszuarbeiten. Die Anfänger_innen im Zeichnen sollen die Proportionen und Gelenke festlegen, ein Repertoire von Haltungen, Posen und Bewegungen erlernen.

Aber seit einigen Jahren ist eine neue Art von Handbüchern hinzugekommen, in denen es nicht mehr im Vordergrund steht, den menschlichen Körper zu zeichnen, sondern stattdessen sofort ›Lieblingshelden‹ aus dem Universum der Mangas und Animes. Nach diesen Anleitungen überspringen die Zeichenschüler_innen die anatomischen und physiologischen Grundlagen, die seit Jahrhunderten eine Grundlage des Kunstunterrichts bilden. Was der oder die Zeichnende imitiert, ist nunmehr die Zeichnung, und zwar eine mit einer bereits extrem kodifizierten Zeichensprache. So entstehen mehr und mehr äußerst stilisierte Figuren, die allesamt wie enge Verwandte aussehen. Es ist auf keinen Fall verboten, hierin eine Form der Verarmung zu sehen, und zwar nicht nur grafischer Natur, die sich sogar auf die Identität und Tiefe der Figuren auswirkt. Sie ähneln wirklichen Persönlichkeiten immer weniger und wirken mehr und mehr wie Zeichnungen. Um noch einmal auf Eggman zu kommen: Insgesamt gesehen reicht es, die Vereinfachung um einige Grade zu steigern.

Abschließen möchte ich diese Studie gern mit einer Zeichnerin, Marion Fayolle, welche anatomische Proportionen berücksichtigt und deren Figuren eine ›klassische‹ menschliche Erscheinung haben (Abb. 5). In Comicalben wie *La Tendresse des pierres* oder *Les Amours suspendues* sieht man Männer und Frauen herumtollen, im Kampf mit dem Leben, dem Tod, dem Begehren, der Fantasie – Männer und Frauen, die sich mit ihren familiären Beziehungen auseinandersetzen, den emotionalen, amourösen und sexuellen. Obwohl Fayolle die Natur des Menschen in all ihren Dimensionen thematisiert, scheinen ihre Figuren, die ohne eine soziale oder berufliche Identität auftreten und lediglich einige minimalistische Veränderungen ihres physiognomischen Ausdrucks aufweisen, nicht die Voraussetzungen für ein experimentelles Ego und damit den Status seiner vollwertigen Figur zu erfüllen. Die Autorin stimmt zu: »Für mich sind Figuren nicht wirklich menschlich, sie haben keinen Vornamen, keine sehr definierte

Identität. Ich sehe sie vor allem als theoretische Silhouetten an, Reflexionsobjekte. Zweifellos aus diesem Grund lenke ich sie ein wenig wie Marionetten, Hampelmänner, die man zerstückeln kann, ohne dass das allzu schlimm wäre. Wie Vasen können sie zerbrechen, wenn sie fallen; wie Kuchen kann man sie in mehrere gleich große Teile teilen; wie Schildkröten können sie ihre Köpfe in ihren Körper einziehen. Für all diese Möglichkeiten liebe ich das Zeichnen so sehr, denn damit kann man alles tun, alles erfinden und andere Versionen der Wirklichkeit erscheinen lassen.«[17]

Abb. 5: Marion Fayolle: Les Amours suspendues. Paris: Magnani, 2017, 207.

Theoretische Silhouetten, Hampelmänner, Marionetten: die Männer und Frauen, die Fayolle zeigt, scheinen uns daher vor allem wie Wesen aus Papier, die letzten Endes, trotz eines ›realistischeren‹ Aussehens, genau wie Eggman vielmehr den Gesetzen der Zeichnung und der Fantasie gehorchen als denen der physischen Welt. Generell ist der Strich der Zeichnerin nicht besonders fleischlich und verweist auf keine der grafischen Familien, aus denen der moderne Comic, und im Besonderen die *bande dessinée*, besteht. Wenn man die referenzielle Dimension von Fayolles Werken genauer in den Blick nähme, würde man feststellen, dass diese in den Kontext gewisser schon älterer Werke führt (entstanden in den 50er-Jahren), deren Ästhetik beispielsweise auch einen Glen Baxter beeinflusst hat.

Darüber hinaus entwickeln sich die Figuren, wie in *Les Amours suspendues*, in nicht-Kulissen, in leeren oder abstrakten Räumen, die reduziert werden auf einen Fußboden, eine Ziegelsteinmauer, eine perspektivisch beobachtete Zimmerecke, eine Landschaft aus Kartonmasse. Wie Elemente von Kulissen, die für eine Bühne geschaffen sind, auf der die Entwicklungen der Figuren präzise choreografiert zu sein scheinen. Es schleicht sich beim

Lesen dieses Werks der Gedanke ein, dass man eine grafische Aufführung erlebt, die sich die Erscheinung einer dramatischen Aufführung gibt. Auf der einen Seite ist da der Pas de deux, der die Figuren aneinanderbindet, die Requisiten, mit denen sie spielen, die drei Frauen, die einen Chor bilden (202f.), der Kameraschwenk auf die Sitze, die sich gerade mit Publikum füllen, bevor sich der Vorhang für den Epilog hebt (223–226); auf der anderen Seite aber gibt es Prozesse, denen sich die (pseudo-)körperlichen Hüllen der Schauspieler_innen unterziehen müssen: Fragmentierung, Zerstückelung, Verdoppelung, Zusammenfalten wie ein Akkordeon, Bleichen und dann Rekolorierung etc. Das erinnert an die Veränderungen des Körpers in *Little Nemo in Slumberland* und hört gleichzeitig nie auf, jede Möglichkeit einer referenziellen Illusion zerstörend und ganz im Gegenteil die *Faktizität* des Schauspiels bestätigend, immer wieder aufs Neue zu bekräftigen: ›all das ist Zeichnung, nichts als Zeichnung‹. Fayolle vermischt die Kodierungen des lebendigen Schauspiels mit denen der gezeichneten Erzählung und erschafft so eine einzigartige Synthese.

Auf Seite 125 in *Amours suspendues* ruft sich der Mann Empathie ins Gedächtnis, ein Gefühl, das er dank seiner Frau begonnen habe zu fühlen, sagt er, denn diese habe ihm »beigebracht an andere zu denken«[18].

In der ganzen Erzählung sind es die Figuren, die unserer emotionalen Beteiligung eine feste Form verleihen. Man hätte früher von einer ›Identifizierung‹ der Leser_innen (oder Zuschauer_innen) mit den Figuren gesprochen. Lavocat behauptet zu Recht, dass das Konzept der Empathie dasjenige der Identifikation weitgehend verdrängt hat (348). Sie erinnert daran, dass »Empathie bedeutet die Gefühle der anderen zu spüren«[19] und dass »Sympathie Wohlwollen gegenüber jemandem bezeichnet«[20].

Weil die Leser_innen nicht alle identisch sind, glaube ich nicht, dass es möglich ist, für alle gleichermaßen festzulegen, inwiefern die ›Quasi-Figuren‹, die uns begegnet sind, in uns Gefühle wie Empathie, Sympathie oder eben Identifikation hervorzurufen vermögen. Es scheint dennoch so zu sein, dass das ganze bestehende grafische Universum erfolgreich darin ist, uns mit seiner jeweils eigenen Logik in den Bann zu ziehen, und dass unser Begehren nach Erzählung, eine anthropologische Dimension der menschlichen Spezies, mächtig genug ist, um uns mit rudimentären oder unechten Wesen warmwerden zu lassen und auf sie die ganze Tiefe unseres Weltbildes zu projizieren.

Denn der Comic ist eine Kunstform, voll von Konventionen und beruhend auf einer Kodierung, die immer etwas anders ist als das Reale. Sie hat ohne Zweifel die ontologische Fähigkeit, uns einen Bären aufzubinden – und uns in einer Silhouette, einem Ei oder einem Punkt eine Person sehen zu lassen.

Übersetzung: Julia Ingold, Rosa Wohlers

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Abb. 3: François Ayroles: Feinte Trinité. In: OuBaPo: Oupus 2. Paris: L'Association, 2003, 24.

Abb. 4: Alex Baladi: Petit Trait: Paris: L'Association, 2008, o. S.

Abb. 5: Marion Fayolle: Les Amours suspendues. Paris: Magnani, 2017, 207.

1] »une certaine condescendance« (Lavocat, 13). Wenn nicht anders gekennzeichnet, sind auch alle französischen Zitate von den Übersetzerinnen selbst übersetzt.

2] »l'effervescence qui entoure les nouveaux usages partagés de la fiction – fanfictions, mondes en ligne, *cosplay* –« (Lavocat, 16).

3] Im französischen Original steht »ego expérimental« (Kundera 1986), was wir mit »experimentelles Ego« (Kundera 1987) für treffender übersetzt halten als mit »experimentelles Ich« (Kundera 2007) , denn ›Ich‹ wäre im Französischen ›Moi‹.

4] »l'activité projective qui nous fait traiter le [personnage] *comme* une personne est essentielle à la création et à la réception des récits« (Schaeffer, 623).

5] »Le fait de marcher sur les traces du ›roman réaliste et psychologique‹ et de la littérature de confession est sans doute un des facteurs qui, en cassant l'assimilation entre elle et le récit d'évasion, a permis à la bande dessinée de gagner en respectabilité« (Groensteen, 82).

6] »C'est le trait et le style qui sont en mesure de donner de la consistance à ce ›moi de papier‹, et non la ressemblance. […] Mon trait est-il mon véritable corps?« (Menu/Rosset, 11).

7] »petite ligne enroulée sur elle-même« (Rouillon o. D.).

8] »sorte d'idéogramme du moi« (Rouillon o. D.).

9] »son moi le plus intime« (Jahan).

10] »écriture qui se lit en même temps qu'elle se voit« (Jahan).

11] Das Buch ist auch auf Deutsch erschienen als *Das Lange Ungelernte Leben des Rolands Gethers*. Der Autor hat zwei Fortsetzungen herausgebracht, betitelt *The Failed Promise of Bradley Gethers* und *The Inauspicious Adventures of Filson Gethers*, von ähnlichem Umfang. Zusammen ergeben sie die Trilogie der *Longshot Comics*.

12] »squelette brut« (Menu, 413).

13] »imagé et imageant« (Van Lier, 5).

14] »L'œuf, c'est la forme basique, la forme la plus facile à dessiner. Je reviens toujours vers des formes simples pour mes personnages, et ce n'est pas la première fois que je donne vie à un homme-œuf. Bolas Bug, personnage de mes premiers livres au Rouergue et à L'Association, en était un aussi. Sauf que Bolas Bug avait un nez, une bouche et une cravate, éléments dont peut se passer Eggman. Une cravate pour Eggman ? Non, surtout pas, il n'est habillé que de sa coquille, ça lui suffit amplement. Et pas de bouche non plus, il n'en a pas besoin: il vit dans un monde muet«.

15] »ce qui fascine à la lecture de *I Am The Eggman*, c'est la curieuse sensation de contempler quelque chose qui, bien loin de la vie, est au plus proche du vivant. De voir sous son nez s'épanouir un écosystème autonome qui évoluera au fil des pages puis dans notre imagination, une fois le livre terminé …« (Bernard)

16] »Dans le film de fiction classique, le regard de face d'un acteur est extrêmement rare: il est généralement considéré comme une déchirure brutale du tissu fictionnel« (Marion/Anciaux, 102).

17] »Pour moi, les personnages ne sont pas vraiment des humains, ils n'ont pas de prénom, pas d'identité très définie. Je les vois davantage comme des silhouettes théoriques, des sujets à réflexion. C'est sans doute pour cette raison que je les manipule un peu comme des marionnettes, des pantins que l'on peut démembrer sans que cela ne soit trop grave. Comme des vases, ils peuvent se casser en chutant ; comme des gâteaux, on peut les partager en parts égales ; comme des tortues, ils peuvent rentrer leur tête dans leur corps. C'est pour toutes ces possibilités que j'aime autant le dessin, parce qu'avec lui, on peut tout faire, tout inventer et faire apparaître d'autres visions du réel« (Tissier).

18] »appris à prendre les autres en considération« (Fayolle, 125).

19] »l'empathie consiste à éprouver les sentiments d'autrui« (Lavocat, 355).

20] »la sympathie désigne une attitude de bienveillance à l'égard de quelqu'un« (Lavocat, 355).

CLOSURE
Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung

Graphic Storytelling

Teaching Experience and Utility

Darren C. Fisher (Melbourne/Victoria)

Introduction

Waves of rolling economic shutdowns throughout the world in 2020 and into 2021 have, among other things, led to reappraising art's value concerning ›essential work‹ that sustains modern human life. A renewed appreciation of art's impact on our mental, physical, and emotional health has arisen because our routines and liberties face such profound disruption and ongoing uncertainty. This article will discuss the arts' renewed functional social utility in this pandemic context, identifying drawing as 1) a foundational art that plays a crucial role in driving and developing myriad art forms and 2) an accessible practice with benefits in mental health resilience and slow-living skills. A key focus of this article is Neil Cohn's 2012 paper »Explaining ›I Can't Draw‹: Parallels between the Structure and Development of Language and Drawing«, which provides a template from which to integrate supporting ideas and research.

While neither the most authoritative nor informed, mainstream media conversations register some level of community opinion. Within this context, a British mainstream press readership poll (Tracy) conducted in June 2020 ranked being an artist as the number one non-essential job. At the top of the list of essential jobs were doctor, nurse, cleaner, and garbage collector, many of which also spearheaded the list of ›jobs that I don't want to do‹. At the other end of the scale, a May 2020 piece in *The London Evening Standard* (Thompson) claimed the arts have never been more critical to our mental health and wellbeing. To this flawed debate, a 2021 report commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts added a survey of 260 people who identified as graphic storytellers, which returned promising results. The report found that demand for graphic storytellers is growing across various fields, including Health, Education, and Product Design, with new opportunities emerging in visual language for internal communications, mapping, strategic thinking and problem solving (Patrick Grant et al.).

The growth of graphic storytelling and increasing awareness of its utility may be vital in changing perceptions of the arts as viable career opportunities to progress traditionally glacial shifts of cultural values. A misstep would be to reframe graphic storytelling and drawing as production tools alone; they are languages of conceptualization and communication, vehicles of experience, and binders of ideas. The article will close with a consideration of how these viewpoints informed the design of an online comic workshop as part of CLOSURE's 2020 International Autumn Online School. This remotely delivered 90-minute session led participants through a suite of activities to impart foundational skills in graphic storytelling to adults and non-practitioners, building upon teaching experience with young adults in the Higher Education sector. In summation, this article seeks to add a voice of support to highlight the utility, benefit, and experience of drawing from a practical perspective.

Organic Knowing

Howard Gardner argues for at least ten forms of intelligence: visual/spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic, musical/rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, naturalistic, moral, and existential (2011). Drawing engages a number of these intelligences across the physical, emotional, spatial, and cerebral. Within a Practice Led Creative Research context, »making is conceived to be the driving force behind the research, and in certain modes of practice also the creator of ideas« (Mäkelä, 79). Chris Gavaler recognizes that drawing plays an integral part in the evolution of ideas and stories as he states that »a drawing is not simply the execution of an idea, « because »things happen in the drawing process itself« (14). Ivan Brunetti agrees with Gavaler as he points out that »structure cannot be imposed from without; it must develop, grow, evolve from within« (6). Citing Chris Ware, Brunetti stresses that »allowing one's drawings to suggest the direction of a story is comics' single greatest formal advantage« (66). This perspective considers visual language's complex relationship with text, setting up a paradigm where stories are ›constructed‹ through writing and organically ›grown‹ through drawing.

Part of how images suggest previously unconsidered story development in their growth process is through the interactions of media, individual biomechanics, and practiced habits. The constraints and influences of materials, medium, and motor skills create what Australian cartoonist Pat Grant refers to as an uncontrollable or inevitable nature of the visual outcomes, stating that

> to cartoon is to make marks that are locked within a nest of cages. Some of these cages are created by the author. Some are created by the conventions and idioms of the visual language. Some are created by the practical restraints of the workflow. Either way, the friction between the cartooning body and the walls of these cages is an essential component of style (172).

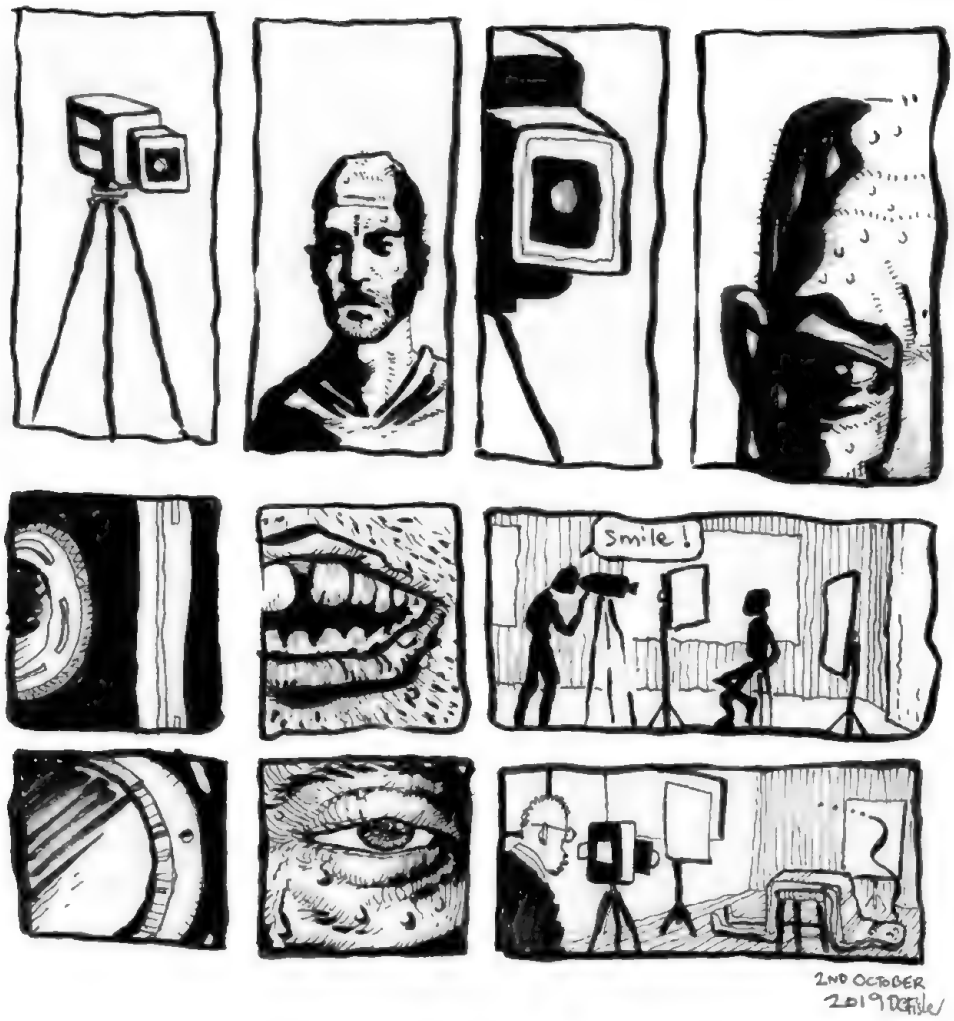

Fig. 1: Diary Comics 1 – ›Straight ahead‹ image-based story development.

This personalized approach to drawing creates a unique space for creativity with many benefits, including »promoting personal change, development of identity and self-awareness« (Blomdahl et al., 322), even superseding pharmacology regarding specific prolonged symptoms and activity limitations (see Thyme et al., Körlin et al.). These correlations suggest a causal link between our mental health and drawing as a largely forgotten yet vitally important form of human expression.

The Language of Cultural Misapprehensions

Although the comparison between drawing and language is not new (Arnheim; Willats), Cohn further articulates a link between the two as expressions of our basic need to communicate, proposing that drawing is »fundamental […] to humans as a species« (167). The foun-

der of ›Literary Darwinism‹, Joseph Carroll, echoes Cohn's assertion from an evolutionary perspective, stating that we »have evolved dispositions for [...] participating in shared forms of imagination through stories, songs, dance, and visual images« (90). This evolutionary and fundamental nature of drawing is evident at an early age. Children instinctively lay the foundations for image production by scribbling meaningless marks, similarly to how they begin speaking by first producing inarticulate noises. The ability to draw and communicate through image production is widely accessible physically. Still, a shift in cultural attitudes and misinformation is required before more adults assume their rightful role as visual storytellers.

A child's engagement and progression in drawing often abruptly ceases around the age of puberty, commonly attributed to a lack of interest or motivation (Davis). Popular misconceptions include that those who continue to draw past their teenage years have an innate gift for artistry, or otherwise have worked hard to overcome a ›normal‹ post-puberty inertia. Naturally, such cessation of use does not occur with language, making the link between language and drawing appear tenuous. However, when viewing trends in drawing progression across cultures, the association gathers credibility. Japanese children, for example, do not stagnate similarly to their equivalents in the West. To understand why, we must consider cultural influences, primarily, the saturation of Japanese comics, or manga, an essential medium that

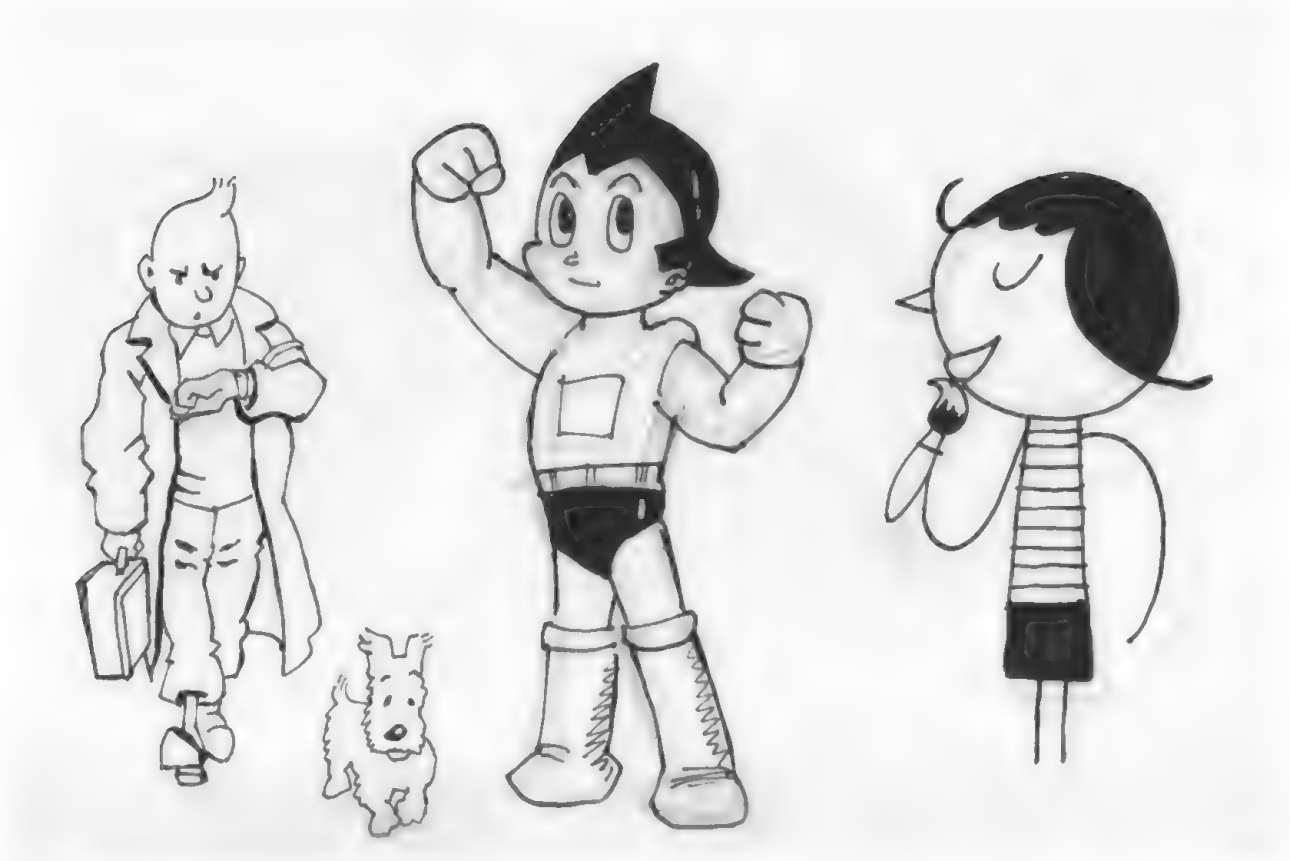

Fig. 2: Observational drawing 1 – Mimicking iconic styles.

transcends genre and unifies demographics through its largely uniform language of symbols, marks, and design. Cohn refers to this visual language as a graphic lexicon, a mental library of graphics the user chooses from in the process of drawing and engaging in other forms of visual communication, including comics.

Challenges facing Western children in building a useable graphic lexicon include the general devaluation of the arts as previously outlined. Additional blocks of progress are the many visual styles and lack of differentiation regarding their cultural significance. This idea of cultural significance is critical, as the consistency of graphic schemas provides essential building blocks in the development of drawing proficiency (see Wilson). Despite our globalized economies, we exist in culturally constrained silos that shape the success of a sustained drawing habit. As with language, ongoing development is aided by encouragement and immersion, considering that we do not learn purely in pursuit of utility in business or as a means to a skillfully modulated end. The verbal-linguistic mode allows us to

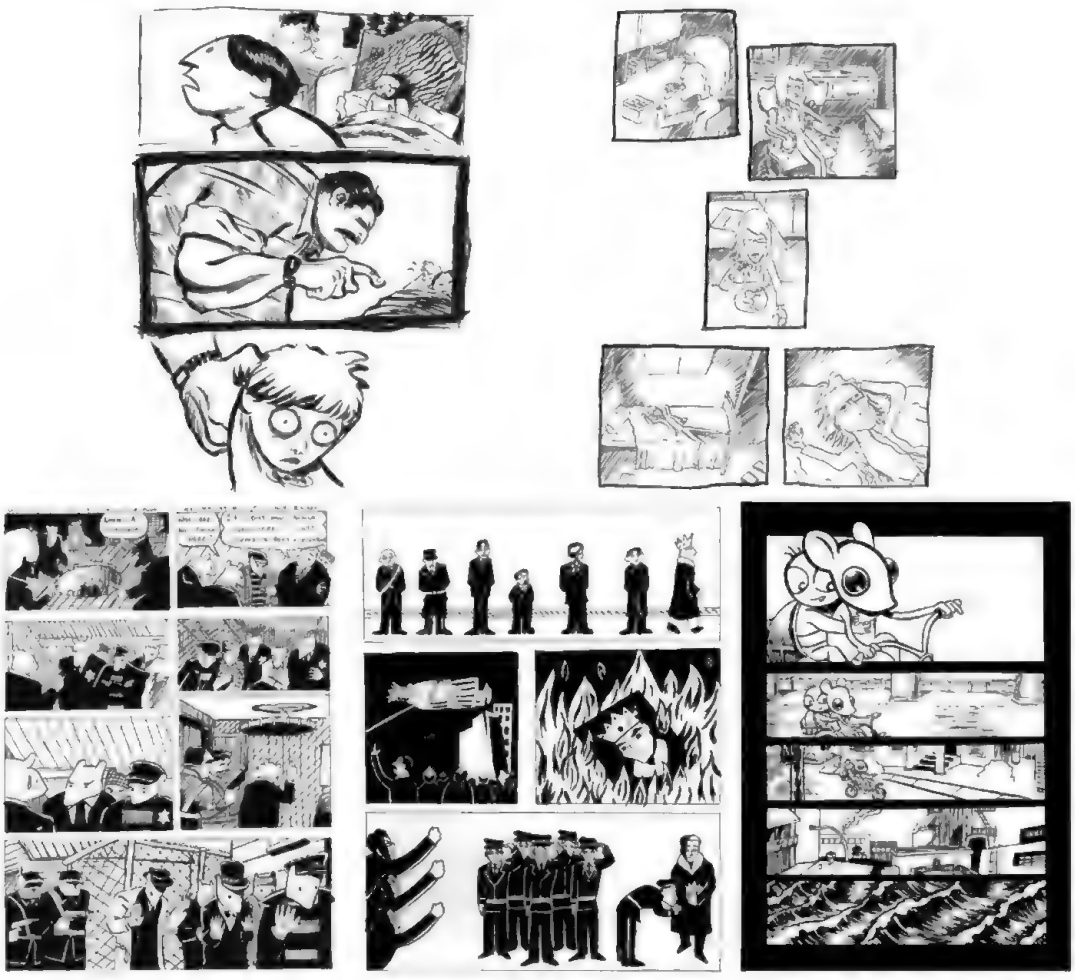

Fig. 3: Observational drawing 2 – Mimicking comic styles.

Fig. 4: Memory Drawing 1 – Colour and composition on social experience.

exchange ideas and to understand ourselves via conversation and internal self-narration. Language also facilitates the experience and expression of emotion through cultural, religious and personal acts, including singing, praying and chanting. Such analogies to the nature of language may help us navigate drawing's reconceptualization as a tool of deep personal benefit as it spreads into the realm of commerce. In the context of negotiating essential work and waves of rolling pandemic lockdowns, this is a pivotal moment to reappraise existing misapprehensions of art and rediscover drawing as a necessary contribution to our lives.

Merging Binary Oppositions

There are broadly two dominant fields of thought and approach to drawing. These are Observational Drawing (also referred to as life-drawing, visual realism, and view-based depiction); and Memory Drawing (also called intellectual-realism and object-based depiction). Traditionally, observational drawing is encouraged to develop drawing competency, which we can apply for communicative or conceptual purposes in conjunction with the imagination. Advice commonly given to developing artists is to learn to draw through the observation and graphical representation of life. This advice manifests in various ways, from life drawing and plein air painting to furtively sketching people in public settings. Modern research adds to the arguments for observation while adding a nuanced understanding of its application. While art institutions have long criticized

the imitation of other people's drawings (see Lowenfeld), in fact, imitating other artists has been shown to fuel overall creativity (Ishibashi and Okada). From my perspective, drawing requires more complexity than simple either/or binary oppositions. It is common for students with highly developed observational drawing skills to find memory drawing a challenge, and conversely, those who rely on memory alone tend to be underdeveloped in observational drawing proficiencies.

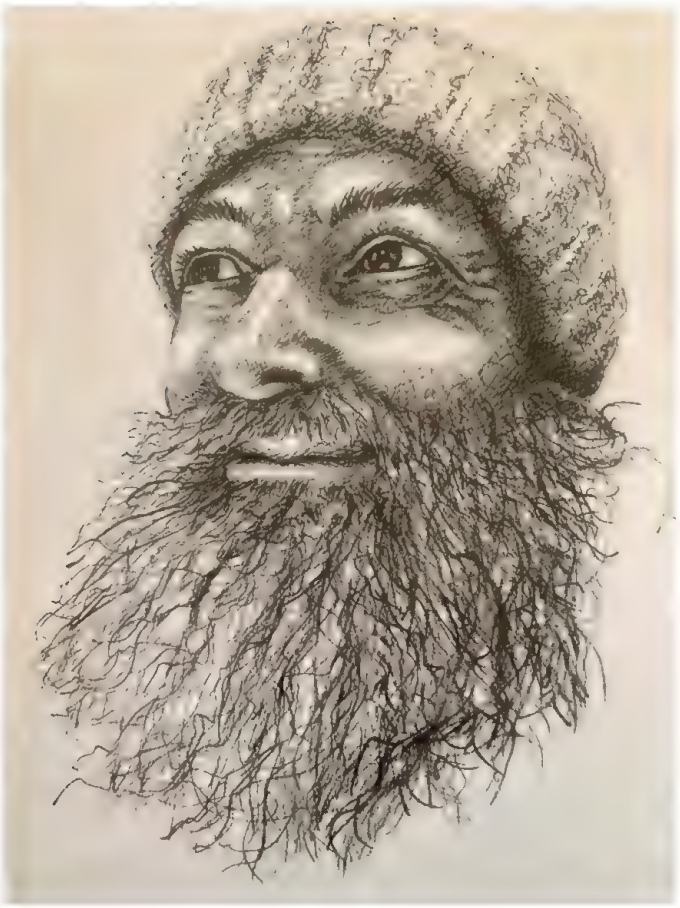

Fig. 5: Observational drawing 3 – Mimicking external graphic syntax (Sketchy School online, portrait class).

According to Cohn, observational drawing articulates a 2.5-dimensional representation of perception, while memory drawing requires a mental 3D model. That is to say, a three-dimensional understanding of graphic elements is necessary to allow for the complete flexibility of their two-dimensional inscription with freedom of axis and rotation. In practice, a mix of approaches is optimal. Memory drawing benefits from the reality check of observation and the application of foundational heuristics. When studying an environment, it is helpful to recreate a perspective set up to find the horizon, vanishing points, and lines of convergence, and adding elements from imagination to an observed scene can bring new worlds to life. Similarly, drawing from memory is aided by composition studies, separations of tonality, and depth elements of foreground, midground and background. Applying all available tools across observation and memory drawing facilitates a more comprehensive and flexible repertoire of image-making than an either/or mindset.

Flowing to Proficiency

Drawing depends on procedures and ingrained habits, baked into a visual/spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic creative inquiry. It incorporates the observed and interoceptive world, cultural

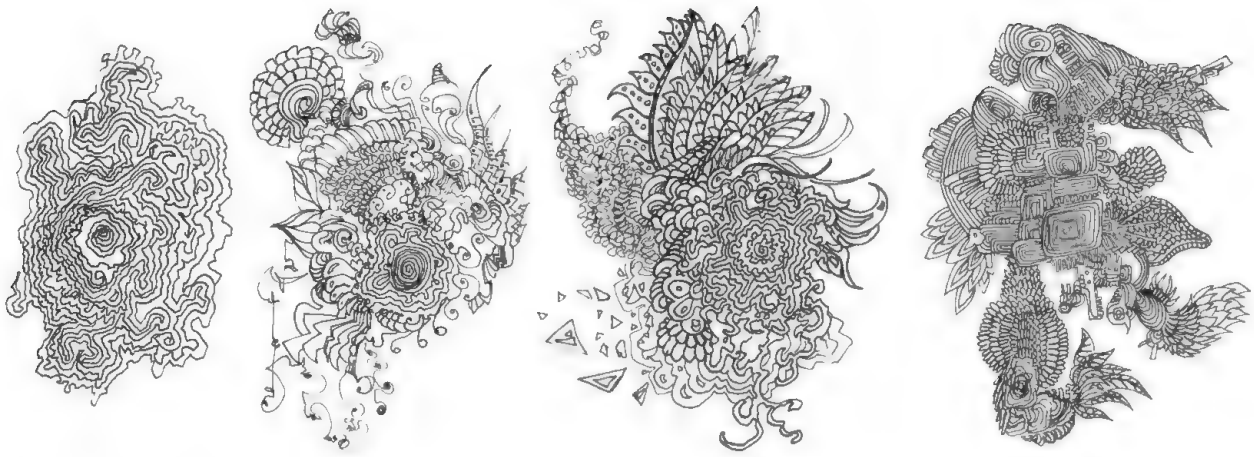

Fig. 6: Automatic drawing 1 – beginning with spiral pattern.

schemas, fine motor skills, the interactions of media, and cognitive choices of design and composition. These elements become merged as material outputs through perseverance, and the ability to sink into deep states of immersive flow.

As both a teacher of Animation in the Higher Education sector and a creative practitioner, I consider it crucial that academic theory also be practical. We need to apply emergent and divergent views on drawing and graphic production to better students and their practice. Advice commonly found in textbooks on drawing and given within art institutions is to draw frequently. However, this advice does not help if the primary will to draw is lacking, and strangely, this importance is not always made explicit, despite research showing that enhanced learning and motivation is driven by foregrounding experience (see Pemberton and Nelson) over expectations of outcome.

In »The Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction«, Brian Boyd states that

> We can define art as cognitive play with pattern [...]. Just as play refines behavioral options over time by being self-rewarding, so art increases cognitive skills, repertoires, and sensitivities [...]. Like play, art succeeds by engaging and rewarding attention, since the more frequent and intense our response, the more powerful the neural consequences (Boyd, 15).

We can enable play patterns in a pedagogical setting by sequentially building activities logically, balancing risk and reward through an individually scalable challenge, and facilitating immersive creativity states. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory provides a framework to understand the deep engagement which can consume an individual to the extent that they lose focus on the outside world, even ignoring biological urges such as hunger (2014). A summarized list of the structures towards creating flow, and characteristics typical of the flow state, include:

- Clear goals every step of the way
- Immediate feedback to one's actions
- Balance between challenge and skill
- Action and awareness are merged
- Distractions are excluded from consciousness
- There is no worry of failure
- Self-consciousness disappears
- The sense of time becomes distorted
- The activity becomes autotelic

There are many barriers to achieving flow. From an institutional perspective, subjective marking processes that overly rely on tacit assessment rubrics can ingrain worry of failure and inhibit a sense of free experimentation. Additionally, some of the flow stages viewed independently are ideologically at odds with modern values and norms. For example, engaging in an activity where time becomes distorted seems counterintuitive in our productivity-focused world. Multi-tasking across countless digital platforms is the norm; excluding distractions from consciousness seems impossible, even undesirable. Given the generative effect of slow living and mindfulness practices, we need to reevaluate these norms. Drawing requires close and ongoing observation creating a feedback loop of creation and correction, which is the second stage of flow, it requires perseverance and patience, with some people sure to find difficulty in being entirely in the moment while drawing. There are also issues of media and familiarity with processes. As discussed, the nested cages of fine motor control, ergonomics, and physical materials play an integral part in the direct experience of drawing.

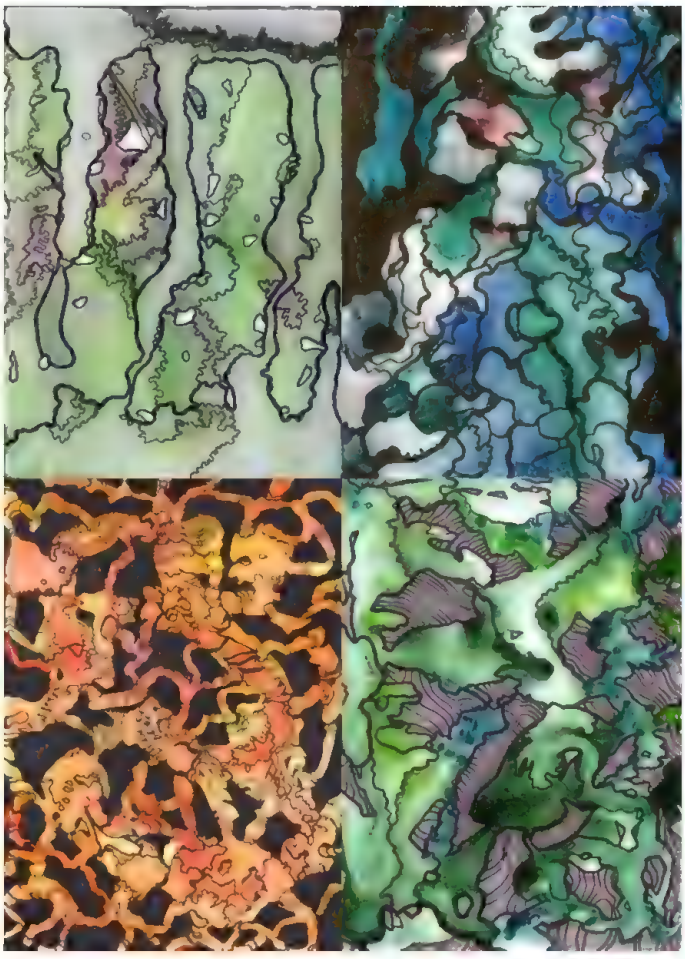

Fig. 7: Automatic drawing 2 – Watercolour and ink.

There are challenging barriers to overcome, particularly in teaching adults to draw. How do we create an entry point for adults reengaging with drawing practices after years of inactivity and burdened by an internal self-narrative of ›I can't draw‹? Keeping the flow stages in mind, I designed activities so that participants would not get too bored or worried, with clear demonstration and sufficient time to engage with activities. The online teaching space poses an extra layer of difficulty in gauging individual comprehension and engagement, requiring sensitivity to track participant progress without causing needless distraction. In designing a workshop structure where drawing is analogous to language, fostering parallel structures in small group discussions proved helpful. Chris Waters' concept of ›telescoping‹ begins with generalized questions before drilling down to more specificity and then telescoping back out to a general overview of covered content. This framework was implemented by starting with an overview of personal art practice, definitions of cartooning, then focusing on concepts of representation and specific exercises before pulling back to general applications.

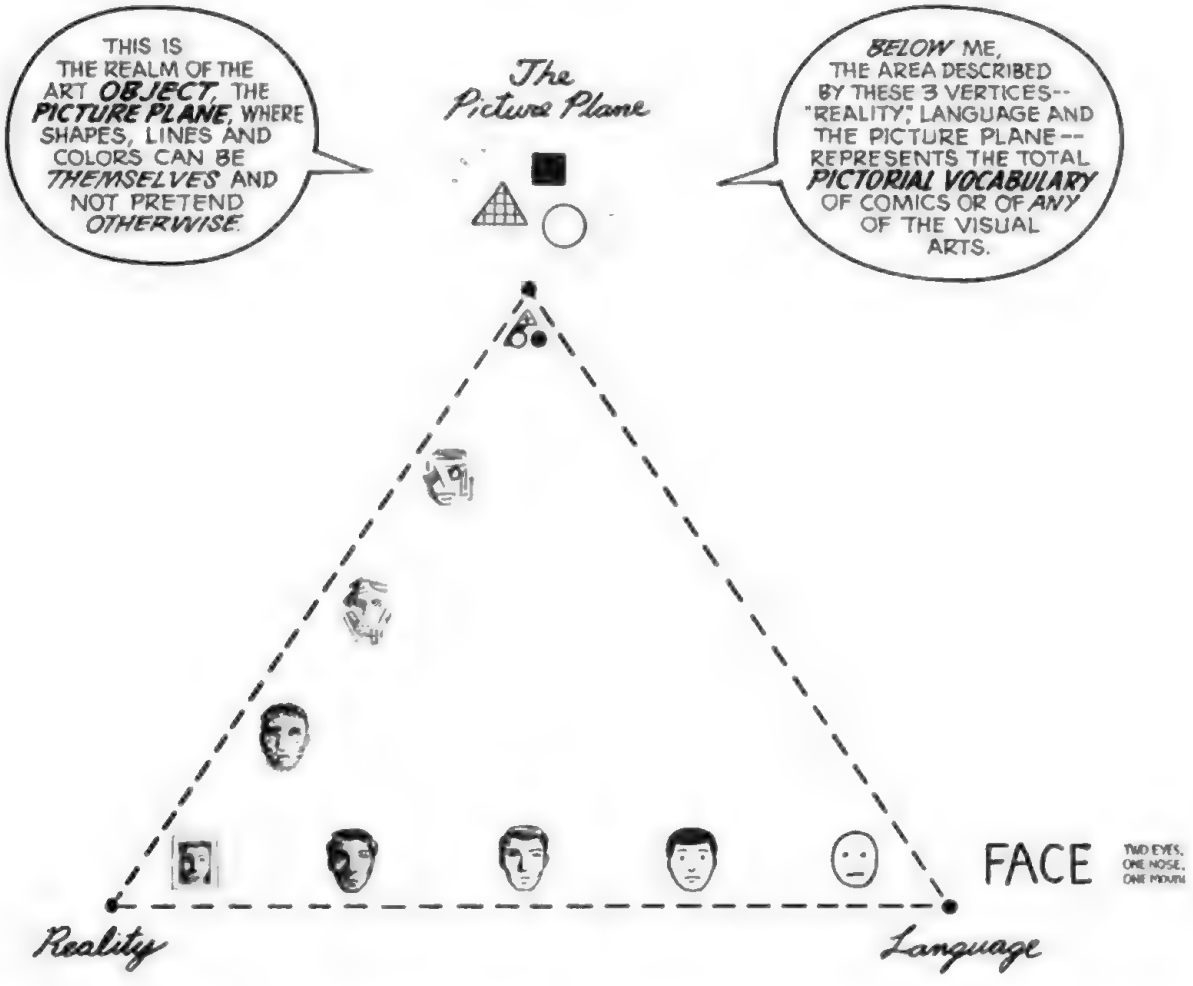
THIS IS THE REALM OF THE ART OBJECT, THE PICTURE PLANE, WHERE SHAPES, LINES AND COLORS CAN BE THEMSELVES AND NOT PRETEND OTHERWISE.
The Picture Plane
BELOW ME, THE AREA DESCRIBED BY THESE 3 VERTICES-- "REALITY," LANGUAGE AND THE PICTURE PLANE-- REPRESENTS THE TOTAL PICTORIAL VOCABULARY OF COMICS OR OF ANY OF THE VISUAL ARTS.
FACE
TWO EYES, ONE NOSE, ONE MOUTH
Reality
Language

Fig. 8: Scott McCloud's *Triangle of Representation.*

My workshop within the Closure Interdisciplinary Online Autumn School began with a short presentation of practitioners and styles to set the tone of autobiographical cartooning before introducing Scott McCloud's *Triangle of Representation* and the natural crossovers between the text, image and meaning. Warmup exercises including two-handed drawing, calling attention to the physical experience of drawing in a new way. A secondary aim of these exercises is to ›loosen the tap‹ of creativity towards a renegotiation of ingrained, limiting beliefs around drawing. The main workshop activity asked participants to visualize a generated list of prompts and then redraw or extend someone else's, mixing graphic lexicons while building confidence in sequential storytelling. This exercise resulted in defamiliarized personal stories, a low-stake form of autobiography. A closing phase of discussion allowed people to reflect on the session, based on Blomdahl et al.'s definition of art therapy as a two-phase procedure of »art creation and the verbalizing of this experience [...] [creating] space for the client's own narrative« (322). Based on Brent Wilson's 2003 findings on the importance of graphic schemas as building blocks of drawing proficiency I included graphics to mimic and springboard from in the workshop design, and emphasized simple drawing tools to encourage ongoing, everyday practice. Multiple activities with frequent check-ins helped to assess people's engagement and try to ensure that the goals were clear enough to be met.

This workshop demonstrated the importance of providing clear goals every step of the way – the first step of creating flow – as some outputs showed a level of uncertainty with what was being asked. This is admittedly not always a straightforward proposition given the many distractions offered by our screens, the disruptions of internet connections, and many participants engaging outside of their first language. However, the primary goal of having people engage with a creative practice was a great success, with the variety of responses to prompts, the interactions, and sharing of outcomes, demonstrating an overcoming of critical self-judgment. Frequent sessions, in a face to face setting, would have a greater chance of setting up sustainable practices, fulfilling Boyd's concept of cognitive play with pattern to facilitate more frequent responses, and more powerful neural consequences.

Conclusion

This article has identified misconceptions of drawing as a niche talent nestled within a reduction of the arts as a dying cultural field maintained through fits of nostalgia and goodwill. Frequent economic shutdowns brought about by the pandemic have driven a cultural conversation that repositions the arts as vital for our individual and collective communal resilience. By identifying its various properties and outcomes, this article has highlighted areas in which drawing can be considered a powerful tool for cognition, communication, and self-therapy. A broad reconsideration of drawing's value is likely to be led by a growing apprecia-

tion for graphic storytelling's utility, a unifier of multiple realms of intelligence, and an agent of immersive flow. Within this perspective, slow and generative care for the self-compliments our modern thirst for productivity because we are more sustainably productive as a result.

A small selection of cultural challenges inhibits greater uptake of drawing practice, identified through comparison to Japan, where the proliferation of manga creates a suitable environment for children to continue drawing through mimicry of its uniform graphic lexicon. Regardless of such considerable challenges, there are many reasons for us to overcome our inertia towards change, as a personal drawing spans multiple levels of potential influence, from the personal to broader realms of social, political and economic. While framing arts around their perceived utility and industrial relevance will continue, embracing more holistic understandings of less tangible benefits will help affect broad change. When the dominant concepts driving such debates are themselves questioned, opportunities exist to enrich how and why we live.

Fig. 9: Diary Comics 2 – Self depictions.

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CLOSURE
Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung

Never Judge a Book by Its Cover?

Picturing the Interculturally Challenged Self in the Japanese Journals of European Comics Artists Dirk Schwieger, Inga Steinmetz, and Igort[1]

Barbara M. Eggert (Linz)

Since the 1990s, Japan, as the birthplace of manga and anime, has been attracting many European comics artists who went there for inspiration and/or work. With Dirk Schwieger's *Moresukine* (2006), Igort's *Quaderni giapponesi/Japanese Notebooks* (2015/17), and Inga Steinmetz's *Verliebt in Japan* (2017), this article analyzes and compares three heterogeneous examples concerning their comic-specific depiction of intercultural experiences in Japan. Focusing on self-representation in panels and pages that deal with phenomena such as culture shock and assimilation processes, this paper discusses if, how, and to what effect these autobiographically inspired comics – in spite or because of their varying degrees of fictionalization and comicification – echo and/or contradict some ›classical‹ intercultural adaptation theories.

Theories of Intercultural Adaptation

From the many definitions of culture, this article follows Gert Hofstede's (1980) structural approach in defining culture as »the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another« (Hofstede 2001, 9). Hofstede reads culture as observable patterns of cognitive structures which are characteristic for certain social collectives and result from common transgenerational experiences of their members, such as shared values, motifs, beliefs, etc. These mindsets lead to certain culture-specific behavioral patterns.

Most theories of intercultural adaptation create models to explain and describe the internal coping processes and the interrelated changes of behavioral patterns that occur (or don't occur) when a person is confronted with a »collective programming of the mind« that differs from their own. Whereas this confrontation can also take place in one's own culture, for

example, when joining a new subgroup such as the art world and exchanging the etic for the emic perspective (Eggert 2009), most often, intercultural experiences are related to traveling to another country – as is the case in this context.

As a basis for analyzing the media-specific depiction of intercultural experiences and challenges in the Japanese journals of European artists Dirk Schwieger, Inga Steinmetz, and Igor Tuveri aka Igort, I chose to combine three different yet complementary theoretical approaches: Milton Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett 1993), Colleen Ward's theory of cultural learning, and Young Yun Kim's model of deculturation and acculturation over time. All three are considered classics and are used as a framework to sensitize professional staff who supervise foreign students and guest parents alike who participate in international student exchange programs such as ASF.[2]

The Bennett Scale of Intercultural Sensitivity

A core point of Milton J. Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett 1993; 2017) is the experience of (cultural) difference and its different levels of acceptance. In this process of acceptance, Bennett distinguishes between an ethnocentric and an ethnorelative stage. During the ethnocentric stage »the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality« (Bennett 1993, 30). This changes when an individual enters the ethnorelative stage and is marked by the insight that »cultures can only be understood relative to one another, and that particular behavior can only be understood within a cultural context« (Bennett 1993, 46).

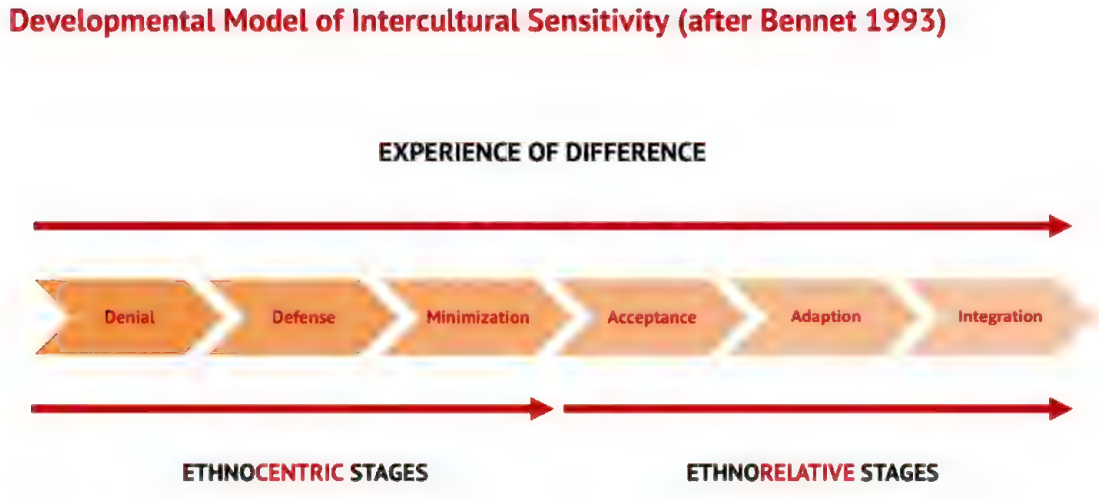

Fig. 1: Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (after Bennett 1993), graph: B. M. Eggert.

Bennett's model consists of six steps. The first step is the denial of cultural difference, which translates as an avoidance of experiencing difference by sticking to one's own homogenous group and results in missing out on intercultural experiences. The sixth and last step is integration, defined as having an identity that is not primarily based on any one culture, but mastering several cultural frames and being able to consciously choose an appropriate alternative in intercultural challenging situations (Bennett 1993). Not every individual experiences all six steps, though. According to an AFS survey (Geeraert & Demes), 90% of students taking part in intercultural exchange programs to study abroad start with step 3 (minimization of cultural differences) and stay there, if they return home too early. Step 3, the last ethnocentric step, is marked by trivialization and/or romanticization of cultural differences and assuming that elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal (Bennett 1993). However, this view changes when students begin to immerse themselves in their new contexts. This is when an adaptation process sets in and intercultural learning and the acquisition of intercultural competence begin.

As for intercultural competence, Colleen Ward distinguishes between affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects all of which are important to function in a new cultural context. To gain intercultural competence, an individual has to change their attitude (affective aspect), learn new skills such as a foreign language (behavioristic aspects), and enhance their knowledge (cognitive aspects) of the new culture (Ward 2001; cf. Daerdoff). Building on Ward's distinctions, Young Jun Kim's practice-based ethnorelative theory for deculturation and acculturation over time is mainly concerned with the process of learning and unlearning cultural patterns which are formed by affective, behavioristic, and cognitive aspects.

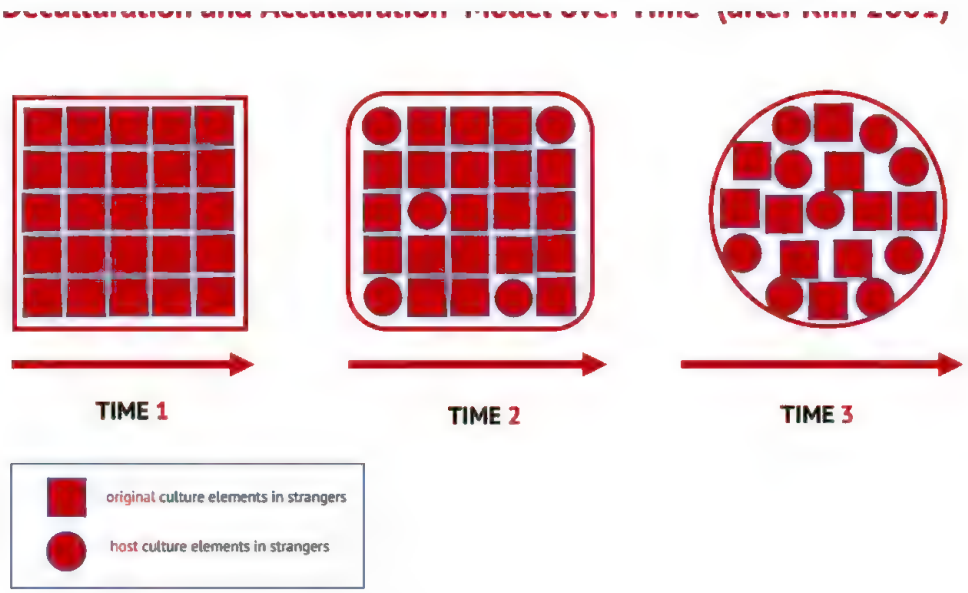

Fig. 2: Deculturation and acculturation model over time (after Kim), graph: B. M. Eggert.

Kim's model visualizes the process of learning new cultural patterns and practices (acculturation), symbolized by dots, and unlearning old patterns of one's native cultural background/s, symbolized by squares. The model also visualizes how the integration of new skills, attitudes, and knowledge concerning a new cultural concept re-shapes the mindset in general as the outline of the form that structures the content changes, too.

Before applying these theories as a lens for analyzing selected panels of three autobiographical Japanese journals by European comics artists, the next section starts with remarks on the mingling of truth and fiction in autobiographical writing in general and in autobiographical comics in particular.

Notes on Autobiography and Autobiographical Comics

Philip Lejeune defines autobiography as »retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own experience, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality« (Lejeune, 4). Central to Lejeune's definition of life writing is the »autobiographical pact« (Lejeune, 22) which has the reader assume that author, narrator, and protagonist are the same person. As Andrew J. Kunka points out, this definition is problematic for autobiographical comics – even if it is the same person who writes and draws, because of the »medium's inherent characteristics of multimodality, sequentiality, and image-text interactions« (Kunka, 6). These formal elements offer many a path for comics artists to represent, perform and reflect on subjectivities rather than signing the autobiographical pact (cf. Krieber). As such, graphic memoirs raise »knotty questions about truth and fictiveness, realism and fantasy, and the relationship between author and audience« (Hatfield, X), especially »the fragmentation of the narrative into panels separated by gutters challenge the verifiability of events represented in the comic« (Kunka, 7). Yet, autobiographical comics »allow the artist to structure the narrative to correspond to a larger, emotional truth, and to visually externalize subjectivity on the page in a way that is constitutive of selfhood while remaining true to dominant ideas of the self as fragmented and multiple« (Køhlert, 127). I will get back to these observations in my analysis of the autobiographical comics of Dirk Schwieger, Inga Steinmetz, and Igort.

Elizabeth El Refaie defines autobiographical comics as »a loose category of life writing through the use of sequential images and (usually) words« (48). Whereas this genre used to be central to »alternative, small-press comics production in North America and Western Europe« (El Refaie, 36), it has by now become »central to comics, full stop« (Kunka, 3). Kunka distinguishes between two sorts of autobiographical comics: trauma narratives and comics addressing »the mundane, quotidian, often humorous experiences

of daily life« (Kunka, 2). Both can »exercise a power to universalize the creator's individual experience, whether it's through art style, panel layouts, or other narrative techniques« (Kunka, 3).

As will be shown, the autobiographical comics of Dirk Schwieger and Igort are examples for the latter category. Inga Steinmetz's work, however, overlaps with both categories, as she also addresses her parents' divorce and its impact on herself (Steinmetz 2017, 14–23) hence contradicting Kunka's rigid classification.

Dirk Schwieger, Inga Steinmetz, and Igort: Framing Autobiographical Encounters with Japanese Culture

How do Dirk Schwieger, Inga Steinmetz, and Igort tell their »emotional truth« (Køhlert, 127)? How do they represent universal phenomena such as experiencing (and coping with) intercultural stress, acculturation, deculturation, and intercultural learning in their individual autobiographical comics? Which comic-specific narrative techniques and which drawing styles do they apply to tell their (non-traumatic) stories? Which role(s) do they choose for their avatar as a stand-in for their experiencing self? And how do they engage with the repetitive self-representation, their »pictural embodiment« (El Refaie, 36)?

As will be shown, each of the three artists has a different approach which becomes apparent when going against the famous proverb and judging the books by their covers.

Fig. 3: Cover of *Moresukine* (Schwieger 2008).

Moresukine – Dirk's Deculturation or Death by Fugu

In 2006, German comic artist Dirk Schwieger spent six months in Tokyo and documented his experiences online using his *Tokyoblog* (Schwieger 2006) for uploading pages of his

art work. His book, *Moresukine*, is a printed version of this blog. It is named after the famous Moleskine notebook used by traveling authors such as Bruce Chatwin and echoes its look in format and color, as well as details such as a paper banderole. To reflect on the geographical context of his notes Schwieger uses a spelling of the brand name that is closer to the Japanese version (モレスキン, moresukin).

The mor/leskinefication of the blog, its transformation into a notebook of the famous brand, also includes minor details such as rounded edges and the addition of a ribbon. Only the quality of the paper and the thickness of the cover are slight variations of the original. Whereas his publication is a very convincing mock-up of the famous notebook, Dirk Schwieger applies a rather abstract style for his avatar. Nevertheless, the similarities between the features of the comics artist and his avatar communicate clearly that it does not represent just anyone but Dirk Schwieger. The author also keeps his own name for his avatar to stress the connection. The first glimpse of a fragment of Schwieger's self-representation is to be found on the banderole of the book (Fig. 3): it shows an open mouth which is about to be entered by a piece of potentially poisonous blowfish or *fugu* – as is indicated by a speech bubble bearing this information. The other speech bubbles seal the »autobiographic pact« as they inform the reader who is talking and reflecting here: the author himself, who is being marked as identical with the narrating I and the experiencing I – and this trinity has second thoughts about the *fugu*-tasting. This intradiegetic voicing of discomfort is quite symptomatic for the book: Schwieger's sometimes challenging encounters with scenarios and objects considered to be typically Japanese don't happen by choice as they are commissioned by the readers of his interactive blog. Dirk Schwieger[3] had invited them to send him on quests he would take on in the order of their arrival – no matter what they would be. All in all, he undertook 24 quests, which form the chapters of the book.[4]

Each passage spans four to five pages and follows the same pattern: Dirk Schwieger quotes or rephrases the wording of each commission and uses the rest of the pages to give an account in words and images of what happened after taking on the challenge. The episodes include several food-related quests (*sushi*, *natto*, tinned coffee, and, finally, *fugu*), others are location-checking missions (a museum, a love hotel, a capsule hotel, and a roller coaster), whereas a third group wants Dirk Schwieger to enhance his and, by this way, his commissioner's own knowledge on social matters such as religion, fashion, gender questions, slang, telephone clubs, and clubbing. Only two of his missions address intercultural difficulties *expressis verbis*: mission 2 (January 23, 2006)[5] has Schwieger revealing his most awkward moment, whereas commission 10 (March 20, 2006) leads to a disclosure of WTF[6]-moments. According to this entry, the most awkward moment happens during his first days at work and features an exploding toilet, caused by pressing a wrong button. Not familiar with the Japanese language, Dirk chooses the most prominent one, assuming from

what he was used to in Germany that the biggest button would activate a flush, the main function of a toilet, whereas, in fact, this button activates the bidet mode. This error is a textbook illustration for Bennett's step 3, involuntary minimization of cultural differences by applying the patterns of one's own culture (Bennett 1993, 30) – in this case, the hierarchy concerning toilet functions would be echoed in the prominence of the buttons. In the end, Dirk cleans up behind himself – and successfully tries to hush up the incident. In the last panel of this episode, we see Dirk suffering from post-intercultural-mishap-stress, but now, he is ready to enter the next step on Bennett's scale: the acceptance of the fact that all values and beliefs exist in a cultural context (Bennett 1993, 46).

In this episode, Schwieger applies two different avatars for representing his experiencing self, making use of the multimodality of the medium: his constant Dirk-shaped avatar is used to visualize the humiliating toilet incident. For the panels which show him at work and fully functional, at least from the outside, he is represented by a football-headed MSN messenger gravatar. This gravatar was created by his colleagues as an iconic stand-in for the new German colleague – and hence integrates the Japanese perspective on the German foreigner into the narrative.

In the WTF-episode, the 10th quest (March 20, 2006), Schwieger admits to being overwhelmed by the constant level of noise – and by fear of earthquakes. The narration starts with Dirk's image on several billboards in Shibuya and has all of these fragmented selves mentioning the awkward bidet episode again while claiming that his whole blog consists of WTF-moments, advertising his own intercultural incompetence. In general, Dirk hardly ever is fully in the picture: in almost all embodiments, some of his body parts don't make it into the frame. There seem to be two exceptions: one panel shows Dirk in his sleeping bag (quest 8: *Home Story*, March 6, 2006) – but his body is invisible because of the padded fabric. Another has him dancing at a *para para* dance event where everyone performs identical movements – or at least tries to do so (quest 9: *Para Para*, March 13, 2006). Dirk is depicted head to toe, but instead of just documenting this event, Schwieger visually communicates his discomfort concerning this forced de-individualization: one of his legs is merely bones and sinews and hence marks him as a zombie. So, in the end, the reader never gets to see all of Dirk.

Though Schwieger, by virtue of the commissions, has made significant progress to cope with stress (affective learning, Ward) and knows a lot more about Japanese (popular) culture (cognitive learning, Ward), he still is constantly being challenged by his lack of language skills (behavioristic learning, Ward) which even forces him to have a translator with him for some tasks and doesn't allow himself to become fully immersed.

The 24th and last quest (June 26, 2006) is a *fugu*-tasting, a fragment of which we already spotted on the banderole. Wanting to please Luke, who commissioned this task, Schwieger samples the blowfish, which can be fatal if prepared improperly – and has his avatar envi-

Fig. 4: Envisioning death by Fugu (Schwieger 2006, quest 24, June 26, 2006).

sioning death by *fugu*. In this episode, Schwieger adopts the view that in one's last moments one's life rushes by in a stream of images, just like watching a movie in fast-forward (Fig. 4). However, his avatar's stream of images consists only of fragmented flickers of his adventures in Tokyo, identical to the table of contents, taking Kim's model of acculturation and deculturation over time one step further in omitting all elements from Dirk's original culture.

In love with Japan – Putting Inga Steinmetz's »Schneeballen« on the Bennett Scale

Verliebt in Japan [transl. *In Love in/with Japan*] (2017) is Inga Steinmetz's second autobiographical comic. Other than some of her colleagues such as Alison Bechdel (2006), Marjane Satrapi (2007), Craig Thompson (2003), Dirk Schwieger (2006), and Igort (2015/17) who stick

to their real names for the embodiment of their self-representations in their graphic memoirs, Inga Steinmetz created a consistent avatar called Schneeballen[7] to write about her own experiences in comics. Usually, the cartoonesque Schneeballen wears her blond hair in a bun and combines a strawberry-colored dress with a German flag for a coat. All *Schneeballen*-books employ a sugar-coated style. Unlike for her *manga*, such as her *Alpha Girl* mini-series (2012; 2014), Steinmetz uses mainly pastel colors and adopts an overall *kawaii*-look[8] for her autobiographic art. With their chubbiness in combination with comparatively large heads and childish features, her iconic avatar and all other characters resemble *chibi*.[9] Whereas in *manga*, *chibi* are generally used for giving additional emphasis to a character's emotional reaction – for example when bursting with anger, the character morphs into a *chibi* – Steinmetz's characters never morph, they always remain in *chibi*-style.

In love with Japan is based on Inga Steinmetz's journey to and stay in Tokyo in 2015 which she documented in her travel blog while being there (Steinmetz 2015). In contrast to Dirk Schwieger who spent half a year working in Tokyo, Berlin-based comics artist and *mangaka* Steinmetz visited her friend Carolin as a tourist for just a month. Whereas Schwieger's *Moresukine* provides us with a fragmentary and fragmenting view of and on himself and his intercultural experiences, echoing a technique that is typical for the medium of comics, Inga Steinmetz puts her avatar front and center.

This starts with the cover illustration (Fig. 5) which shows Schneeballen clad in traditional Japanese garments: a printed summer kimono, also known as *yukata*, which is held in place by a broad belt (*obi*). Schneeballen sports matching accessories such as a small handbag, an ornamental hairpin (*kanzashi*), and *geta*, flipflop-like sandals with wooden soles, held in place by fabric thongs. Hand in hand with her own heart, Schneeballen poses at a typical tourist spot as if having her picture taken by someone else: standing in an idealized stereotype landscape with a lake, ginkgo tree, and a wooden shrine with lacquered columns in the background, Schneeballen doesn't only wear Japanese clothing – she has already internalized typical Japanese

Fig. 5: Cover of *Verliebt in Japan* (Steinmetz 2017).

gestures and postures such as inwards turned legs and the peace sign as is culturally appropriate for young Japanese women in this situation. Hence, the cover is an example of the second step (Fig. 2, Time 2) in Kim's model of deculturation and acculturation over time as Schneeballen's performance deviates from behavioristic patterns of her (and Steinmetz's) original cultural context. Schneeballen's appearance on the cover as a wide-eyed and sweet tourist, ready to explore Japanese customs and costumes, has already captured the role she assumes for this book.

Only half of the story takes place in Japan – the other half of the book is dedicated to another transition: exploring the culture of wedding planning and marriage. The adventure in Tokyo commences on page 56 where we learn about Schneeballen's pact with her friend: in exchange for 30 days of accommodation, Schneeballen agrees to take care of Carolin's apartment. Despite being labeled *Settling in 1*, page 56 seems not to deal with getting accustomed to Tokyo and Japanese lifestyle – but with settling in with the role of being Carolin's guest or, rather, housemaid. The maid is a classical role in *otaku* culture and there are several *manga*, for example, the series *Emma* (2002–06) by Kaoru Mori and *Maid-sama* (2005–13) by Hiro Fujiwara, as well as institutions such as maid-cafés reflecting this trend. So, in a way, Schneeballen gets Japanized by being depicted as a *manga* character stereotype in full regalia (57). Parallel to Schneeballen changing her appearance, the layout of the story alters, too: while the first part and the end of the comic which focus on Schneeballen's life in Berlin are structured with panels or a free arrangement of words and images, most of the 38 episodes set in Japan employ the structure of *yonkoma*. This Japanese version of a comic strip is composed of four vertically arranged panels of the same size. Steinmetz combines these panels either with drawings of objects which play an important role in these mini-stories or with pastels of Japanese everyday items. Most of the 38 episodes deal with Schneeballen embracing the otherness of Japanese everyday objects, mostly clothing (73, 80, Fig. 6) and food (84–90, 97).

Tokyo Street Style
Was grade auf Tokyos Straßen hipp ist:
Niedliche Socken (auch zu Sandalen!)
Zweilagige Röcke mit Organza
Überlange Jacken
Außerdem gilt Gold dieses Jahr als Glücksfarbe – also gibt es goldene Taschen, Schuhe...
Stylisch
Trans-formation abge-schlossen!
Hm!
Mit Carolins Hilfe.

Fig. 6: *Schneeballen in Japan* (Steinmetz 2017, 80).

Translated into Kim's model of adaptation (Fig. 2), Inga lets her avatar incorporate the culture by enjoying typical Japanese food as often as possible while at the same time surrounding herself with Japanese fashion as a second skin, thereby mostly changing her outer appearance. In doing so, she practices cognitive learning (Ward 2001) concerning material culture. Mirroring the fashioning of her avatar, she also dresses her narration and her European gaze in *yonkoma* style without adopting its rigor concerning content. In romanticizing cultural differences, Steinmetz's avatar Schneeballen is mockingly constructed as a classic instance of step 3 on Bennet's scale (Fig. 1) and makes a likable model for identification, also helped along by the iconic style that pulls the reader in.

Bennett and Beyond: Igort's *Japanese Notebooks*

While Dirk and Inga have their avatars embrace their outsider status and the awkwardness that comes along with it, in the first volume of his *Quarderni giapponesi* (2015) and its English translation *Japanese Notebooks* (2017a),[10] Italian comic artist Igor Tuveri aka Igort chose to paint an ambivalent picture of himself. Of the three artists compared here, Igort employs the most realistic style for his graphic memoir which is based on his private sketchbooks, notes, and photos. His drawings echo the materiality of his sources on different levels: parts of the book, for example, look like a facsimile of a ruled Muji-note book,[11] while elements on other pages mimic photographs. This mimesis adds a note of »I have been there«, and functions as »proof of authenticity« (Attanasio, 85), marking the *Japanese Notebooks* as Igort's very own story, universal applicability not being intended.

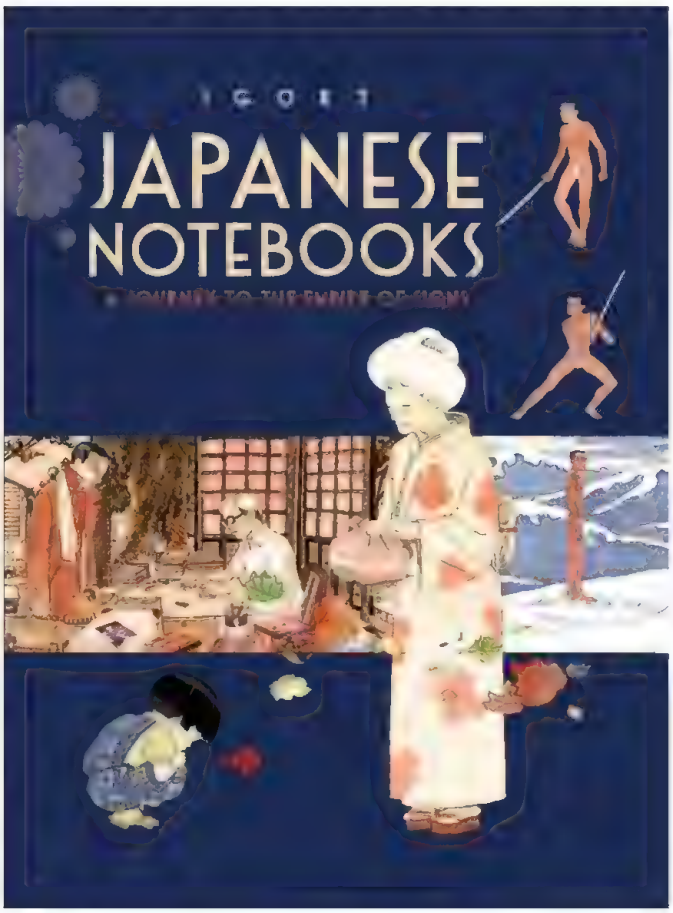

Fig. 7: Cover of *Japanese Notebooks* (Igort 2017a).

Given the subtitle of the book, it is not surprising that Igort starts his graphic memoir echoing Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs* as he admits the impossibility of reaching the Japan of

his dreams (7).[12] The first page with drawings, however, tells a different story. We see his brainchild *Yuri* on the same shelf with the *manga* of Japanese *mangaka*, including Tezuka Osamu. Igort's *Yuri* is not being singled out as a foreign body but is shown side by side with the native products (8). For the beginning of his narration, Igort chose 1994, the year in which he had signed a contract with Tokyo-based publishing house Kodansha and moved to Tokyo for half a year (cf. Attanasio, 84). When starting this position, Igort had no command of the language and a lot of doubts concerning his guidebook: he wonders if it is okay to blow his nose in public or not and if there really are 101 ways to say me, myself and I (28). Regardless of his many doubts, there is only one thing he admits to being afraid of: riding a bus. However, his worries about whether he would be able to understand the announcements for the stops and get off at the right one are only documented in the text while the pictures show his efficient performance (13). Igort succeeds – and this is the only time the author voices concern for an intercultural challenge because of his lack of knowledge. A common factor of the intercultural adaptation theories by Bennet, Ward, and Kim, is that a lack of skills – be they of affective, behavioristic, or cognitive nature – is seen as an obstacle for effective and successful performance in a new cultural context. One episode in Igort's *Japanese Notebook* contradicts this, as he documents the benefits of not knowing local customs.

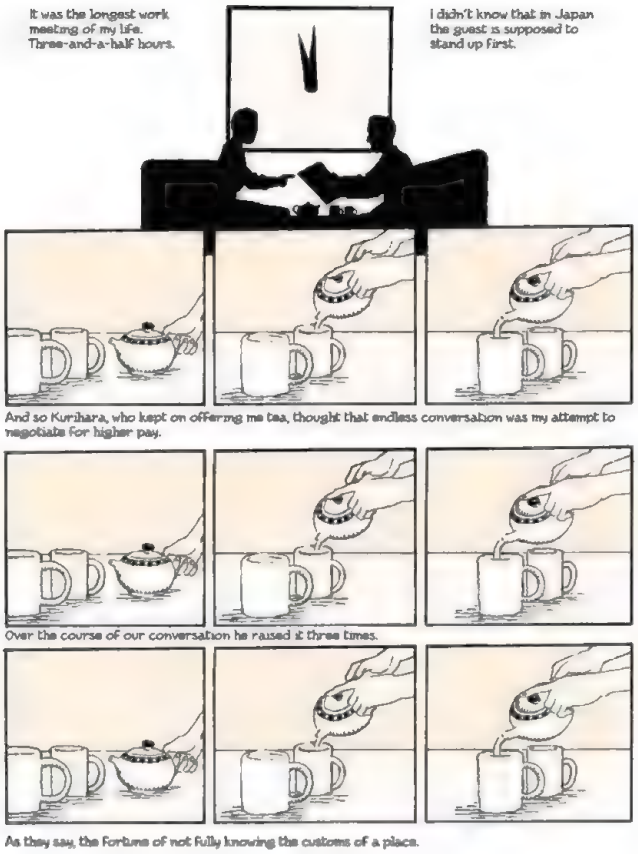
It was the longest work meeting of my life. Three-and-a-half hours.
I didn't know that in Japan the guest is supposed to stand up first.
And so Kurihara, who kept on offering me tea, thought that endless conversation was my attempt to negotiate for higher pay.
Over the course of our conversation he raised it three times.
As they say, the fortune of not fully knowing the customs of a place.

Fig. 8: Drinking tea and waiting (Igort 2017a, 27).

During his first visit to Japan in 1991, his cognitive ignorance wins him a higher salary in a meeting with Kodansha's leader, Kurihara-san. Not being aware of the pattern that the guest has to get up first to end a conversation, Igort remains seated which causes Kurihara-san to offer Igort more money for his services (27). In this case, Igort's ignorance is strength. However, the accompanying panels don't visualize any embodiment (Fig. 8). Instead, through Igort's eyes, we witness the repetitive ceremony of pouring tea again, and again, and again, nine squares repeating three steps for three times, slowing the narration down and letting the message sink in.

Except for these two episodes, Igort presents himself as a *connoisseur* of Japanese culture concerning literature, films, history, and lifestyle – just to name a few aspects. The collage-like assemblage on the cover (Fig. 7) proves to be a pictorial condensation of his knowledge of Japanese culture and, as it turns out, a boast of his intercultural achievements.

From left to right, we have a drawing reminiscent of a snapshot that shows Igort at the inner sanctum of Studio Ghibli in Tokyo in conversation with Hayao Miyazaki. It is the moment when they discover their shared love for notebooks by Muji for their professional work (144). Right on the cover, Igort presents himself as a professional with access to Japanese experts in his field. The other images on the cover are vignettes for Igort's intimate knowledge of Japanese literature and anime since they are quotes from Miyazaki's anime *Fireflies* from 1988 (138) and Yukio Mishima's autobiography (34/35). These allusions can of course be recognized by people who are familiar with Miyazaki's films and Mishima's writing. The prominent depiction of an old Japanese woman who carries a *bento* remains enigmatic, though. Igort saves the best for last and solves this riddle for his readers in the postscript: as it turns out, the woman is an embodiment of Igort's belief of having been Japanese in a former life (64). This belief finds an echo in a dream of his translator, Midori. Midori, when dreaming of an elegant old woman inside a kimono shop, knows that this must be an incarnation of Igort from the beginning of the 20th century [179/180].

In contrast to the humble verbal introduction, the pictorial collage on the cover is actually quite boastful: Igort might not have found access to the Japan of his dreams (7) – but he stepped inside the dream of at least one Japanese woman. In Midori's dream, Igort rises even beyond step 6 of Bennet's scale as he becomes the reincarnation of a Japanese person.

Conclusion: Covering Stories

As the paper has shown, models for intercultural adaptation by Bennett (1993), Ward, and Kim can be applied fruitfully to analyze and classify intercultural incidents as they are depicted in the Japanese journals of European comics artists Dirk Schwieger, Inga Steinmetz, and Igort. In all three cases, this classification helps significantly to contour and identify the construction of the narrating I and the experiencing I that were chosen by each author. As we have seen in all three examples, the chosen construct can already be grasped from the design of the cover where the introduction and staging of the autobiographical avatars take place. All three covers offer, in a nutshell, the gist of the different concepts for the authorial representation in the comics and introduce the artists' individual styles. At the same time, they bear important information on the comic-specific forms and techniques of narration applied in each case.

Dirk Schwieger assumes the role of the interactive approachable expat errand boy, inviting his readers to steer him from one quest to another. He does not offer the big picture, but a kaleidoscope of fragmented glimpses, echoed by his abstract, fragmentized avatar who literally is never fully in the picture. He invites his readers to share his process of cognitive learning which mainly concerns enhancing his knowledge of material culture and habits. On the Bennett scale (Fig. 1), Schwieger can be located in the transition between stage 3 and stage 4 in accepting that »particular behavior can only be understood within a cultural context « (Bennett 1993, 46). Though Schwieger signs the »authenticity contract« (Enli, 16), he also breaks it several times by visualizing his feelings in a way that transforms, multiplies, or fragmentizes his embodiments. In the last episode of the blog, Schwieger, while living on, even lets his avatar die of food poisoning by *fugu*.

Like Schwieger, Inga Steinmetz presents herself as an outsider who doesn't know much about Japan before getting there. Her iconic cartoonesque avatar, Schneeballen, is caught in two fairy tales at the same time – her wedding and her trip to Japan. The episodes in Japan are embedded within the marriage narration. Textiles as a second skin and as elements of a successful *rite de passage* play an important role in both narrative strings, be it the wedding dress, *harajuku* street style, or a traditional *yukata*. Steinmetz's time in Japan is way too short to allow for immersion that marks the last step on Kim's model of deculturation and acculturation over time (Kim 2001). Nevertheless, she has already started to exchange some elements of her original culture against elements of her host culture (Fig. 2), but these mainly concern food and fashion. Starting with the cover, Schneeballen as experiencing I is always in the picture, in style, and dressing the part – very much unlike Dirk who is rather presented as a narrating and focalizing I. Whereas Schwieger and Steinmetz show their avatars as merely having mastered entering the first ethnorelative step on the Bennett scale (Fig. 1), Igor Tuveri is off the scale: he might not have found access to the Japan of his dreams (7), but he enters the dream of one Japanese woman. At least in Midori's dream, Igort rises even beyond Bennett's last ethnorelative step 6 as he declares himself the reincarnation of a Japanese woman. Of all three examples, Igort's style is the most realistic and the most documentary one. Furthermore, the documentary character of his work is enhanced by the use of photos as a »gesture toward authenticity« (Kunka, 72). His graphic narration can be read as a collage of mixed media to visualize his intercultural competence as well as his successful international career.

Traveling and keeping a travel journal has a long-standing tradition, especially among artists and scholars.[13] In the 18th and 19th centuries, Italy held the greatest attraction for European authors, sculptors, and painters. One famous testimony to this infatuation is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Italienische Reise* [transl. *Italian Journey*] (1816/17) which is based on his travel diaries from 1786–88. Whereas Linda Barry coined the term »autobifictional« (Barry, 7) for autobiographical comics which resort to documentary as well

as fictional elements, the term applies as well to Goethe's writing, who reworked his travel diary significantly before publishing it. For example, he purged remarks from it that were too personal and didn't match his status any longer. At the same time, he channeled the illusion of immediacy by pretending to assemble original letters and diary entries from the time they describe (Hösle, 1–2), in contrast to Barry. Indeed, Barry who has her alter ego (if mockingly so) wonder: »Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?« (Barry, 7), Goethe doesn't see this as a case of either–or. In a letter to his friend, Zelter, dated 17 May 1815, he states that the Italian Journey is »zugleich völlig wahrhaft und ein anmutiges Märchen«[14]

This also rings true for the autobiographical travel journals discussed in this context: for Schwieger, Steinmetz, and Igort, Japan is the new Italy, the land of their dreams, waiting to be explored and documented in the comics medium. Yet, as has been shown, all three have a different intercultural fairy tale to tell, using the medium-specific possibilities of comics to focus, exaggerate, and to leave things out that do not match the »emotional truth« they want to convey, a proof of Gardner's thesis that the »losses and glosses of memory and subjectivity are foregrounded in graphic memoir in a way they never can be in traditional in autobiography« (6).

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Fig. 7: Cover of Igort: Japanese Notebooks. A Journey to the Empire of Signs. Trans. Jamie Richards. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2017.

Fig. 8: Igort: Japanese Notebooks. A Journey to the Empire of Signs. Trans. Jamie Richards. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2017, 27.

1] The paper is based on a talk I gave at the international conference *Crossing Borders, Boundaries, and Cultures: Studies in Transnational Comics*, on March 6, 2019, at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. It is dedicated to my esteemed colleague in comics, Steven M. Johnson.

2] AFS Intercultural Programs began as the American Ambulance Field Service, a volunteer ambulance corps created in April 1915 by A. Piatt Andrew.

3] As Schwieger is on first-name terms with his readers, his avatar will hence be referred to as ›Dirk‹ whereas the author will be referred to either as Dirk Schwieger or Schwieger.

4] In the second part of the book (which won't be discussed here) Schwieger changes roles: he becomes the commissioner and asks 10 webcomic artists to meet with a Japanese person at the place they are living right now and to use their art to reflect on this encounter.

5] *Moresukine* is not paginated. The dates in the brackets refer to the date Schwieger posted the episode in his blog.

6] WTF is an acronym used for the phrase ›what the fuck‹.

7] *Schneeballen*, which translates as snowball, is a ball-shaped pastry. It is especially famous in Eastern Germany. As it is covered with confectioner's sugar it looks a bit like a snowball.

8] Roughly translating as cute, the Japanese adjective *kawaii* is used for »anything that breeds feelings of love and the motherly instinct to care and protect« (Okazaki & Johnson 2013, 7). Common characteristics of all things *kawaii* are pastel colors and compositional roundness.

9] *Chibi* is a Japanese slang word that is applied when referring to something small, be it a thing, an animal, or a person. There is a long tradition of using *chibi* both in *shōnen* (teenage male-targeted manga) and *shōjo* (teenage female-targeted manga).

10] In this context, the English version of the first volume (Igort 2017a) will be discussed as it pictures the artist's initial encounters with Japan. For a discussion of the second volume (Igort 2017b) see Attanasio 2020. In this context, the English translation was consulted.

11] *Muji* is a Japanese retailer with 100 stores around the world. They offer a broad range of simple yet elegant stationery. One signature mark of the notebooks is the chamois hue (semi-bleached) of the smooth high-quality paper.

12] For a semiotic reading of the *Japanese Notebooks*, see Attanasio.

13] Though Goethe drew himself and even considered becoming a professional painter while roaming Italy, he hired Christoph Heinrich Kniep to accompany him and to illustrate his travel accounts. Kniep's drawings document the places they visited, but Goethe himself never enters the picture.

14] »I can give simultaneously a true account and tell a graceful fairy-tale« (Hösle, 2). This mix of fact and fiction can also be determined in the famous painting by Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, *Goethe in der (römischen) Campagna* [trans. *Goethe in the Roman Campagna*, 1787, which has the poet reclining in an idealized Italian landscape wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a travel cloak (Braches).

CLOSURE
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Rhetoric of Images

Emblematic Structures and Craig Thompson's *Habibi*

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Comics and emblems consist in their prototypic emergences mainly of a combination of two different codes: simply put, pictures and words. During their respective eras, they have shared a history of broad distribution and popularity. The first and so far, only person to explore the similarities of comics and emblems in detail was Laurence Grove in 2005. In his monograph *Text/Image Mosaics in French Culture: Emblems and Comic Strips* he writes about ›*parallel mentalities*‹ in the ›two Emblematic Ages‹; the 16th and 20th centuries (Grove, xiii–xiv). He analyses how new technologies used to spread media have an influence on culture. What I want to explore are the parallel *strategies* in the rhetoric of the images and the figurative nature of text in emblems and comics. First, I will analyse some randomly chosen emblems – starting with Andrea Alciato's 1531 emblem book, continuing through to 1610 – to explore some specific emblematic strategies. I will discuss how they attempted to convey their messages through the most graphic use of text possible. I will follow this by introducing Craig Thompson's so-called ›graphic novel‹, *Habibi*, and show how it employs similar strategies in the formation of single panels or pages, but also throughout the book in its entirety, to tell its tale vividly. The comparison between the emblems and the graphic novel elucidates how representational pictures in both art forms work as meaningful signs.

Allegories, Metaphors and Symbols in Emblems

In the first edition of Alciatio's *Emblematum liber*, we find the (very funny) occurrence of pictures and words that do not really fit together. The *pictura* of the emblem entitled ›Eloquence, surpassing strength‹, for instance, shows Heracles holding other people prisoner with a strong chain (Fig. 1). The text says:

> His left hand holds a bow, his right hand a stout club, the lion of Nemea clothes his bare body. So this is a figure of Hercules. But he is old and his temples grizzled with age – that does not fit. What of the fact that his tongue has light chains passing through it, by which he draws men along with ready ears pierced? The reason is surely that the Gauls say that Alceus' descendant excelled in eloquence rather than might and gave laws to the nations. – Weapons yield to the arts of peace, and even the hardest of hearts the skilled speaker can lead where he will.[1]

Once one knows what *should* be depicted one can suppose that the hero's tongue is pierced. This explains his apparently oversized mouth. But the chain, which does not appear light at all, does not pierce or stick to the other men's ears. In any case, the illustration emphasizes the graphicness of the text. The *subscriptio* explains its own figurativeness. The strategy that Alciato employs here is deeply allegorical. He establishes a written ›picture‹ and offers its allegoresis at once. He wants to advise or to convey a truth through a parable. But the chain is not a metaphor for eloquent speech because he does not figuratively say that eloquent speech is *like* that chain. The chain *is* the visible eloquent speech because

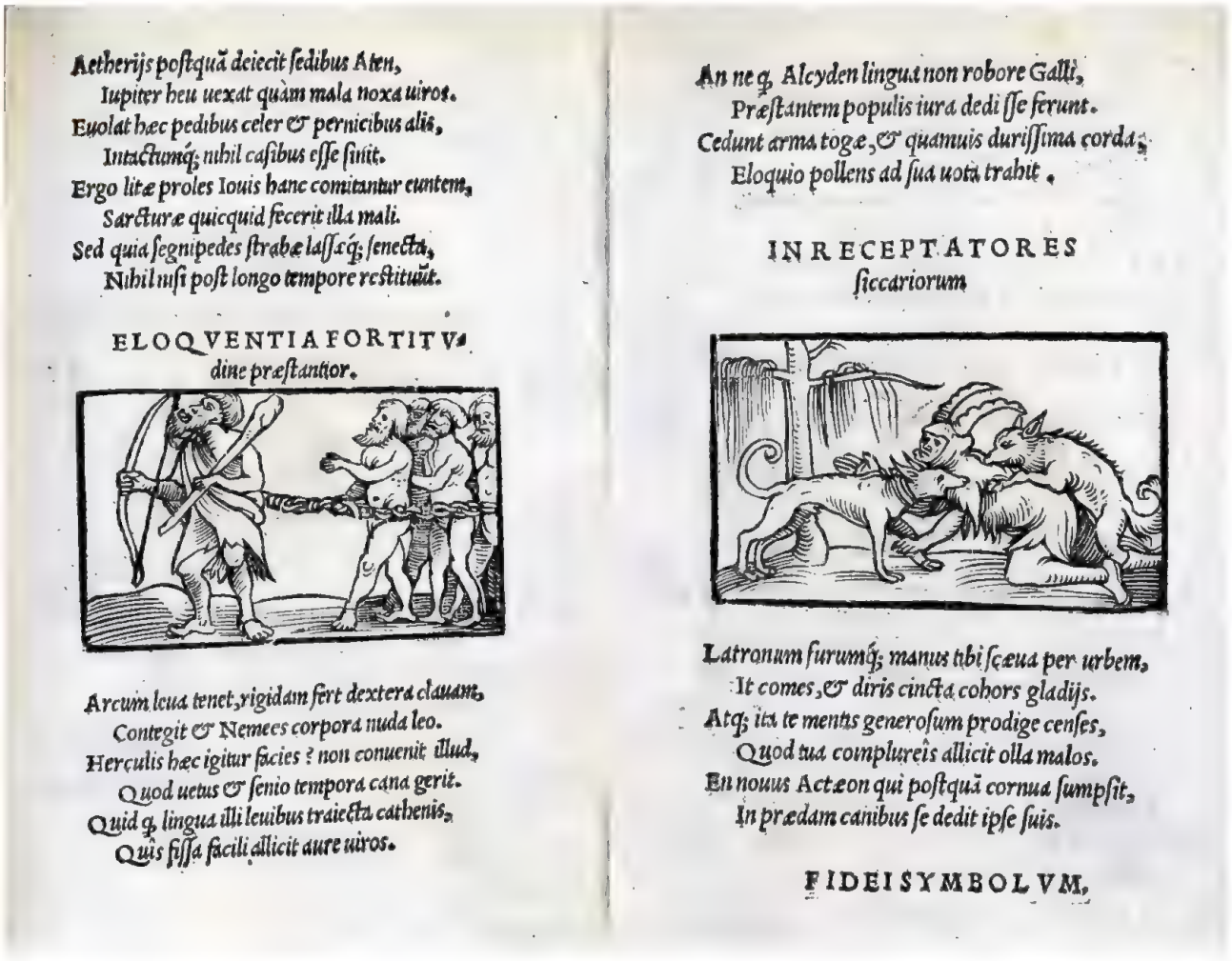
Aetherijs poſtquã deiecit ſedibus Aten,
Iupiter heu uexat quàm mala noxa uiros.
Euolat hæc pedibus celer & pernicibus alis,
Intactumq; nihil caſibus eſſe ſinit.
Ergo litæ proles Iouis hanc comitantur euntem,
Sarcturæ quicquid fecerit illa mali.
Sed quia ſegnipedes ſtrabæ laſſæq; ſenectæ,
Nihil niſi poſt longo tempore reſtituũt.
ELOQVENTIA FORTITV-
dine præſtantior.
Arcum læua tenet, rigidam fert dextera clauam,
Contegit & Nemees corpora nuda leo.
Herculis hæc igitur facies? non conuenit illud,
Quod uetus & ſenio tempora cana gerit.
Quid q, lingua illi leuibus traiecta cathenis,
Quis fiſſa facili allicit aure uiros.
An neq, Alcyden lingua non robore Galli,
Præſtantem populis iura dedi ſſe ferunt.
Cedunt arma togæ, & quamuis duriſſima corda,
Eloquio pollens ad ſua uota trahit.
IN RECEPTATORES
ſiccariorum
Latronum furumq; manus tibi ſcæua per urbem,
It comes, & diris cincta cohors gladijs.
Atq; ita te mentis generoſum prodige cenſes,
Quod tua complureis allicit olla malos.
En nouus Actæon qui poſtquã cornua ſumpſit,
In prædam canibus ſe dedit ipſe ſuis.
FIDEI SYMBOLVM,

Fig. 1: Andrea Alciato: Eloquentia fortitvdine praestantior.

the whole woodcut is materialized written word. In such a case the difference between arbitrary and motivated sign dissolves. Usually, a picture is presumed to be motivated because of its similarity with the signified object while a word is considered to be arbitrary because it only works in cultural contexts and conventions. But here, in the text, the relation is inverted. The elements of the ›textual image‹ are composed syntactically to retrace the meaning of the *inscriptio*.

The next example is Gilles Corrozet's emblem ›The cruelty of love‹[2]. It shows a man who suffers from unfulfilled love (Fig. 2), as he himself explains in the *subscriptio*: »Because I feel the fire of lovesickness excruciating my heart and my body without a Lady to redeem me, my mind must wander to the shadows.«[3] The lover and his beloved are not images for something else; Corrozet wants to talk about lovers. But in the *pictura* the naked man in flames disturbs the realistic depiction. What is happening to him does not really take place in the diegetic world. The way he is depicted is a metaphor for his agonizing feelings because he feels *like* he is burning. Thereby the whole scene loses its physicality and illustrates what is going on in the realm of emotions. Meanwhile the flames themselves are an ancient symbol for love.

La cruaulté d'amour.
Puis que ie ſens par amoureux ēcôbres,
Vng feu qui meĉt cueur & corps à tor-
Sās recepuoir de damę alegemēt (mēt,
Fault que l'eſperit, ſ'en voiſe ſoubz les
vmbres.

Fig. 2: Gilles Corrozet: La cruaulté d'amour.

The term ›symbol‹ itself is ambiguous. Today it is apparent that it has two antithetic meanings. In linguistics, the term is partially used for signs with an *arbitrary* relationship to what they signify, seemingly following Charles Sanders Peirce's terminology (Jeßing, 744). In philosophy and art criticism, ›symbol‹ usually means a conventional sign with a *motivated* relation to what is signified because its meaning has developed over the years or was established by a specific person or cultural artefact and took hold (ibid.). In fact, Peirce's definition of the symbol incorporates both: »A sign which is constituted a sign merely or mainly by the fact that it is used and understood as such, whether the habit is natural or conventional, and without regard to the motives which originally governed its selection.« (Peirce, 307) He calls

a symbol a sign whose understanding depends on an agreement between the different ›users‹ no matter how the sign came to be in that position. The difference between ›natural‹ and ›arbitrary‹ sign is not complementary but antonymous. Thus, a symbol is a *category* of signs, while a metaphor is a *way of using* one. A metaphor tries to explain an abstract or invisible thing through a comparison with a concrete and visible thing. Corrozet did not establish a whole parable to convey one abstract proposition but integrated a surrealist element in a ›natural‹ constellation to reveal its character. Since the metaphor of burning love is so well-established, one would probably not even recognize the graphic nature of the expression ›fire of lovesickness‹ without the woodcut. Again, and showing a parallel between Corrozet's and Alciato's emblems, the image is materialized written word.

In later editions of Alciato's emblems the *picturae* become more suitable for the text. They remain pure illustration, because the text still explains its own figurativeness. The *inscriptio* of emblem titled *PRVDENTIA* in the 1551 Lyon edition – »The Chimaera (those who are stronger and deceptive) to be overcome by judgment and courage« (Alciato 1551, 20)[4] – already contains commentarial information (Fig. 3). The *pictura* shows the Greek myth of Pegasus aiding the hero Bellerophon in defeating the monster Chimaera. The *subscriptio* contains a classic allegoresis of an antique myth: »Bellerophon, that bold horseman, was able to overcome the Chimaera and lay low the monsters of the Lycian land. You likewise, borne on wings of Pegasus, seek the high heavens and, by the counsel of reason, tame proud monsters.« (Ibid.)[5] In this allegory, the characters are personifications of wisdom and courage who overcome strength and deception. This might be the genuine emblematic strategy: a text trying to be figurative for didactic purposes.

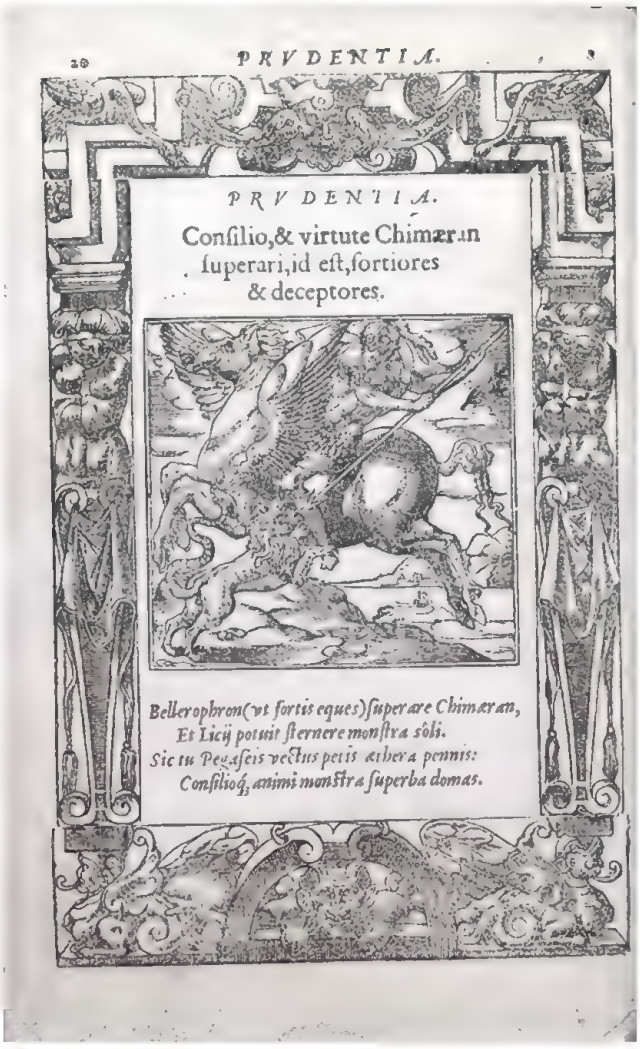

Fig. 3: Andrea Alciato: Prvdentia.

At this point, I briefly want to mention Gerhard Kurz' very helpful definition of metaphor and allegory. It precisely explains the difference between the aforementioned *pictura* with the burning man

and the later narrative one. Kurz writes, »While the metaphor is *metaphorically* unambiguous – the literal meaning is the medium, whereby the metaphoric meaning is conveyed –, allegory is ambiguous (*duplex sententia*), because its meaning lies on the verbal and on the allegorical level.« (Kurz 1979, 16) This is not the story of a burning man, the flames are not narrative or diegetic, they are only metaphorical. But the other *pictura* is narrative and tells the story of the hero Bellerophon. It has two meanings.

CENTVRIA. I. 24
NE·PARS·SYNCERA
EMBLEMA. 24.
Ganaſe el todo, con perder la parte,
Eſtando aquella parte corrompida,
Y en buena razon cabe que ſe aparte,
Por conſeruar el individuo en vida:
La propia mano tienes de cortarte,
Quando fuere del Aſpide mordida,
Antes que llegue al coraçõ ſu flecha,
Que ſi mucho te tardas no aprouecha.
D 4 El
Fig. 4: Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco: Ne pars syncera trahatvr.

The last example was chosen because, surprisingly, it contains some motives that will be relevant for the pictorial language of Thompson's comic book. In *Ne pars syncera trahatvr*, Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco eliminated every narrative or naturalism (Fig. 4). The *subscriptio* says: »You save the whole by losing a perished part. Because you have to reasonably remove it to keep the whole human alive: you have to chop off your own hand if it was bitten by a snake before its poison reaches your heart; if you hesitate too long, you are beyond help.« (Horozco) The *pictura* contains a surreal scene with arbitrary objects floating in the air. It demonstrates how one hand cuts off a finger from the other hand because a snake has it locked in its jaws. Emblematic images like this are pure pictorial scripture. One has to decipher every element of the syntactic structure to get the meaning. Still – as in the first example from Alciato – the written language tries to be figurative while the picture tries to be textual. The *inscriptio* »Lest the healthy part perishes« (Ibid.)[6] leads directly over to *Habibi* and its diegetic world, where the motif of ›cutting off the sick part‹ plays an important role.

Fig. 5: Craig Thompson: Habibi, panel on p. 179.

Emblematic Structures in Thompson's *Habibi*

Published in 2011, the 672-page comic tells the (love) story of two child slaves, Dodola and Zam. They escape together and grow up like mother and son or brother and sister on a boat in a desert until they are violently torn apart. Their separated lives take sorrowful courses, and upon their reunion they must escape once again. Eventually they discover their erotic love for one another. The setting is the fictional desert state ›Wanatolia‹, a fairy-tale world, appearing to be an orientalist industrialist dystopia between Postmodernism and the Middle Ages. Next to skyscrapers, naked girls in chains are sold as slaves; a shopkeeper in an ›Adidas‹ jacket offers paper and ink because printing has not yet been invented; and the sultan possesses hundreds of odalisques for his orgies and a colossal dam that deprives his people of clean potable water. Sexual exploitation and genital mutilation are the recurrent leitmotif. Consistently, Dodola tells myths of rape and mutilation. She has to prostitute herself to the passing caravans for her and Zam's survival on the deserted boat, until the sultan's henchmen kidnap her and shut her in his harem. Zam witnesses one of the caravan men raping her.

This trauma and Dodola's disappearance drive him to become a eunuch and live as female in a community of hijras. The trauma that follows the characters' experiences of sexual abuse and mutilation finds a metaphoric equivalent in the story world. In the reality of the diegesis, Dodola and Zam live on the boat in the desert. But Dodola, selling her body to the caravans, also *feels like* a desert inside. The boat, made for sailing, is completely misplaced. The landscape she is living in is her soul's landscape. Only in her shelter on the boat, where she tells Zam stories, she can cast out the drought inside of her. The leitmotif of dryness appears whenever the characters have to harm their own bodies for their physical survival.

In one key scene, Thompson combines written English, Arab calligraphy and mimetic drawings to form a very dense narrative language (Fig. 5). After accidentally witnessing Dodola's rape, Zam runs off to trade water from a secret spring to the villagers who are deprived of clean water because of the sultan's dam so that Dodola won't have to ›trade‹ her body for his food anymore (Thompson, 148–173), Dodola doesn't know what has happened to him and is sick with worry. When Zam returns to the boat they fight and then reconcile. The panel shows them standing on their shelter in the desert. The calligraphic rain is an excerpt from a poem called *Rain Song* by the Iraqi Poet Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab. At the end of the book, Thompson offers the English translation:

> It is as if archways of mist drank the clouds
> And drop by drop dissolved in the rain…
> As if children snickered in the vineyard bowers,
> The song of the rain…
> Drip…
> Drop… the rain
>
> Evening yawned, from low clouds
> Heavy tears are streaming still.
> It is as if a child before sleep were rambling on
> About his mother (a year ago he went to wake her, did not find her,
> Then was told, for he kept on asking,
> ›After tomorrow, she'll come back again…‹)
>
> That she must come back again,
> Yet his playmates whisper that she is there
> In the hillside, sleeping her death for ever,
> Eating the earth around her, drinking the rain;
> As if a forlorn fisherman gathering nets
> Cursed the waters and fate

And scattered a song at moonset,
Drip, drop, the rain…
Drip, drop, the rain…

Do you know what sorrow the rain can inspire?
Do you know how gutters weep when it pours down?
Do you know how lost a solitary person feels in the rain?
Endless, like split blood, like hungry people, like love,
Like children, like the dead, endless the rain. (Thompson, 670)

Here we see calligraphy like rain, the poem talks about rain and it imitates rain onomatopoetically with the »Drip, drop«. There is no ›real‹ rain in the story world at that point. It is purely metaphoric. It represents how the two orphans can escape into stories. Often, they take refuge in sad stories, like the one the poem tells. But exactly this recounting of other figures' despair helps them to survive their own, time and again.

By comparing it with another panel of *Habibi* (Fig. 6), a lot can be learnt about metaphors and symbols in comics. The other panel shows Dodola carrying the Sultan's child. In the first panel, telling stories on the boat feels *like* rain in the desert for the characters. It is used metaphorically. That the pregnant Dodola feels like a shisha pipe smoked by her baby is a (very original) metaphor as well. The flames, the rain and the Dodola-shisha do not refer to ›real‹ phenomena in the diegetic worlds but show the realm of emotions. All three are metaphoric images because they compare abstract or invisible things to concrete and visible things.

Fig. 6: Craig Thompson: Habibi, panel on p. 271.

But Dodola's frenzy does not feel *like* the Cheshire Cat. The Cheshire Cat is a *symbol* for frenzy that established itself in Western culture increasingly over the years. Its depiction describes Dodola's condition without being present in the diegetic world. There is certainly no Lewis Carroll or his Alice known in Wanatolia. This is a strategy

particular to comic books or other forms of pictorial narration. The cat as symbol works like Pegasus in Alciato's emblem. To fully understand it, one needs to know that the winged horse is an old symbol for wisdom. Otherwise, one will be unable to understand why of all things, *this* myth is an allegory for wisdom and courage. Just as one will not understand why of all things there is a cat prowling around in the air, if one is unfamiliar with the illustrations from *Alice in Wonderland* and the history of its reception in Western culture. Thus, the symbol of the cat is directed at the readers by a form of illustrated narration which is independent from the characters, using symbols taken from the readers' world. In a usual prose novel, it is not possible to use a sign like this in a symbolic way. An author could write that their character sees the Cheshire Cat to indicate frenzy, but that would mean that the character had heard of it. There, the figure of the Cheshire Cat would have to be actually present in the story world; otherwise, it could ›only‹ be used as a metaphor. For example, J. R. R. Tolkien describes Gandalf's firework metaphorically, using an object which doesn't exist in his story world: ›The dragon passed like an express train, turned a somersault, and burst over Bywater with a deafening explosion.‹ (Tolkien, 36) There are no express trains in Middle Earth. It is not

Fig. 7: Craig Thompson: Habibi, panel on p. 155.

the characters who compare the dragon banger to it, but the narrator. He uses this ›written picture‹ in a metaphoric way. Kurz' thoughts on literary symbols only apply to written language: »The symbol is an immanent element of the story. A necessary contiguity exists between symbol and symbolised, both belong to the same context of events, to the same space and time.« (Kurz 1982, 75) Whereas in pictorial language, as Thompson's comic shows, the use of symbols is far more manifold.

The first example of the panel showing metaphoric rain in the desert only works because the author establishes and employs dryness and rain as symbols for loneliness and consolation throughout the book. Therefore, readers understand that the rain is positive and soothing. In another context rain could also be a metaphor for sadness. Thompson thus works with an essentially symbolist strategy – symbolist in terms of a work of art itself defining the meaning of its own symbols – as do all the emblems I discussed when they contain allegory and allegoresis together. When the man from the caravan rapes Dodola, she turns into a withered tree (Fig. 7). She does not really change her form; again, the dryness is a metaphor for her feelings. Her mind must *desert* her body to survive. In this case images work like written metaphors. In a novel, the storyteller would have said that ›Dodola felt like a withered tree‹ or even ›she felt deserted inside‹. Something that is traditionally written, becomes a mimetic drawing, just as in the *picturae* of the emblems. Throughout the book there are pages that do not only contain narrative panels but also forms of diagrammatic schemes that provide proleptic hints and contextualize the incidents and actions in the story with one another. One of them appears after Zam involuntarily observes Dodola being raped by the caravan men (Fig. 8). It shows the relations between the different

Fig. 8: Craig Thompson: Habibi, p. 156.

characters and later events. Zam feels ashamed and guilty of being a man because, as he gets older, he becomes confused by his desire after inadvertently seeing Dodola in the bath, and afterwards daydreaming of her while masturbating for the first time (Thompson, 131–132, 136–137). The branches falling from the withered tree, to which he is attached, refer to his later castration. Dodola drowning in water is this time not positive but rather negative if one understands the water here as the lust of the rapist.

Hereby the water turns into an ambiguous symbol which hints at the ambiguity of sexual desire. This becomes clearer when taking another symbol from the story world into consideration. It is a snake that leads Zam to a secret spring in the desert when he and Dodola are badly in need of drinking water (Thompson, 137–143). But it is also here, when Zam is alone in the desert, that he masturbates whilst imagining the naked Dodola. So, the snake is associated with the desire that Zam will become afraid of later, and with water that is essential for survival. When the hijras castrate Zam, the snake reappears (Fig. 9). There are some similarities to Horozco's emblem in this iconography. Horozco recommends cutting off the sick part to save the whole body from infection and therefore to save the person's life. This is what Zam does. He feels guilty and impure; by cutting off his genitals he hopes to become pure again and receive forgiveness. Both acts of cutting depicted do not happen like that in any diegetic world. In a surrealist scene the objects float in the air. The panels visualize the abstract hope of saving the whole body and eventually even the soul for eternity, by executing a more or less ›small‹ cut and suffering a more or less ›slight‹ pain instead of eternal perdition. Dryness as a metaphoric symbol appears whenever the characters have to harm their bodies for their physical survival. Here, without the castration, Zam would be expelled from the community of hijras that nourish him after Dodola was kidnapped by the sultan's soldiers. The snake connects the

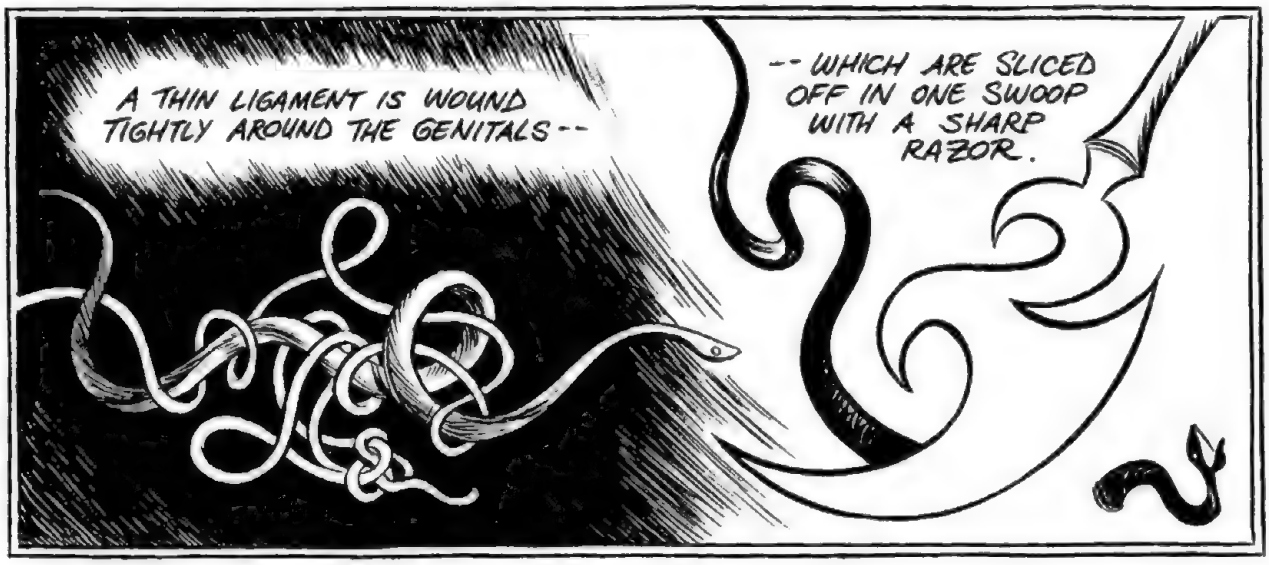

Fig. 9: Craig Thompson: Habibi, panel on p. 336.

scenes and shows their causal interdependence. The snake is conventionally, as in Horozco's emblem, a symbol for sin or evil. In the comic book's immanent symbolism, it is associated with the secret spring and is thus positive. First the symbol is established as a real object in the story world, later it substitutes symbolically Zam's genitals. To replace the genitals with the snake thus means that Zam's mutilation has to be associated with dryness. Zam tries to overcome his sexual lust because he considers it as solely negative (Thompson, 360). But later he begins to recover it, once he and Dodola discover their erotic love for one another (Thompson, 634). He can then understand the ambiguity of desire and learns about its positive and creative power. Undoubtedly, they are an unusual couple. Since Dodola was abused by men throughout her entire life, she learned that conventional penetration »isn't the center of sex« (Thompson, 635). So, they find their own form of having sex and instead of conceiving they adopt a child who is orphaned and enslaved, as they once were (Thompson, 655–657). The snake, the withered trees and the rain are very nice examples of how *Habibi* explains its own ›pictorial scripture,‹ its own figurativeness. The comic book as a whole works like an emblem; its self-reflexivity reveals its own pictorial language. This symbolist emblematic strategy is not found in comic books in general, although possibly there are other examples. However, the use of visual symbols and metaphors in *Habibi* are a common strategy for this art form.

Conclusion

Two main strategies were found to be used by both emblems and comics, in particular *Habibi*, the first being that both explain their own figurativeness. This can be called a symbolist strategy. The second is that they use images like scripture in syntactic structures that must be deciphered. One could be tempted to see the main parallel between emblems and comic books as the hybridity of the art form, but I hope to have shown that the more significant parallel is that they *dissolve* hybridity. Obviously, the difference between words and pictures remains, but their *functions* are in question, both in emblems and comics. If the emblematic strategy succeeds and the symbols are established, one understands pictures as precisely as words and can ›read‹ the message. The explanatory *subscriptiones* become dispensable, as is the case with comics. One last simple example is the speech bubble as it is an arbitrary convention that the tail points at the speaker. Why not at the listener? The speech bubble is invisible sounds as materialized images. Thought bubbles in contrast look like little clouds and everyone knows that the words they contain are not audible. One can only read comic stories properly because of cultural agreements.

Finally, I will return to the concept of allegory that is so important for emblems. Emblems often use metaphors and symbols to create bigger allegorical entities that even contain their own allegoresis. The emblem wants to hand out *advice*. Probably one could read *Habibi*

altogether as an allegory. But the allegoresis is left to the readers or scholars. The comic uses metaphors and symbols to tell its *story* properly and vividly. I was struck by two definitions of the allegorical that I came across. Walter Benjamin writes that allegory »is not a playful picture puzzle, but expression, like language is expression, in fact like scripture« (Benjamin, 178). And Craig Owens, who uses Benjamin's theory of allegory as a starting point to explore postmodern art, states, »This blatant disregard for aesthetic categories is nowhere more apparent than in the reciprocity, which allegory proposes between the visual and the verbal: words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered.« (Owens, 57) Exchanging the word ›allegory‹ for ›comic‹ would offer an adequate definition, and the same applies to emblems. Both art forms merge writtenness of image and figurativeness of text to form one new language; attempting to transform the invisible into visible images, images which then become rhetoric.

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1] »Arcum leua tenet, rigidam fert dextera clauam, / Contegit & Nemees corpora nuda leo. / Herculis hæc igitur facies? non conuenit illud, / Quod uetus & senio tempora cana gerit. / Quid q lingua illi leuibus traiecta cathenis, / Quîs fissa facili allicit aure uiros. / An ne q Alcyden lingua non robore Galli, / Præstantem populis iura dedisse ferunt. / Cedunt arma togæ, & quamvis durissima corda, / Eloquio pollens ad sua uota trahit.« Translation taken from the Glasgow University Emblem Website, <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A31a092>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

2] Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

3] »Puis que ie sens par amoureux écôbres,/ Vng feu qui mect cueur & corps à tormét,/ Sás recepuoir de dame alegemét/ Fault que l'esperit, s'en voise soubz les vmbres.«

4] »Consilio, & virtute Chimaeran superari, id est, fortiores et deceptores.« Translation taken from the Glasgow University Emblem Website, <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A51a014>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

5] »Bellerophron (vt fortis eques) superare Chimæran,/ Et Licij potuit sternere monstra sôli./ Sic tu Pegaseis vectus petis æthera pennis:/ Consilioq animi monstra superba domas.« Translation taken from the Glasgow University Emblem Website, <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A51a014>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

6] »Ne pars syncera trahatvr.«